

ABSTRACT

Constantinos Hasapis, *Overcoming the Spartan Phalanx: The Evolution of Greek Battlefield Tactics, 394 BC- 371 BC.* (Dr. Anthony Papalas, Thesis Director), Spring 2012

The objective of this thesis is to examine the changes in Greek battlefield tactics in the early fourth century as a response to overthrowing what was widely considered by most of Greece tyranny on the part of Sparta. Sparta's hegemony was based on military might, namely her mastery of phalanx warfare. Therefore the key to dismantling Lacedaemonia's overlordship was to defeat her armies on the battlefield.

This thesis will argue that new battle tactics were tried and although there were varying degrees of success, the final victory at Leuctra over the Spartans was due mainly to the use of another phalanx. However, the Theban phalanx was not a merely a copy of Sparta's. New formations, tactics, and battlefield concepts were applied and used successfully when wedded together. Sparta's prospects of maintaining her position of dominance were increasingly bleak. Sparta's phalanx had become more versatile and mobile after the end of the Peloponnesian War but her increasing economic and demographic problems, compounded by outside commitments resulting in imperial overstretch, strained her resources. The additional burden of internal security requirements caused by the need to hold down a massive helot population led to a static position in the face of a dynamic enemy with no such constraints

Overcoming The Spartan Phalanx:
The Evolution
of
Greek Battlefield Tactics,
394 BC-371 BC

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Overcoming the Spartan Phalanx:
The Evolution of Greek Battlefield Tactics, 394 BC-371 BC

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Bibliographic Essay

The study of ancient Greek warfare in a sense begins with Hans Delbrück and his *History of War*. Delbrück was an admirer of Pericles, supported conservative strategies, and emphasized the value of logistics. His conclusions regarding ancient warfare established that the winners of ancient battles triumphed not only through refined tactics and discipline but through superior logistics, allowing them to keep larger armies in the field. His inclusion of other disciplines such as demography and economics played a prominent role in his analysis, presenting a fuller, more complete picture of ancient wars.

Victor Davis Hanson's *Western Way of War* posits that the central pillar of Greek warfare was the decisive infantry clash. He writes that the Greeks invented their distinctive form of warfare in the sixth and fifth centuries BC, a clash of arms designed to settle disputes in a single afternoon. Hanson regards hoplite warfare as war in its purest and most “civilized” form, out in the open and face to face, featuring a charge across open ground towards the enemy culminating in a collision of muscle and bronze. This *othismos*, or great push, represented a stark contrast to the more fluid wars of ambush, skirmishing, and combat between champions that marked Greek warfare of the Archaic and Dark Ages. Hanson's “Epaminondas, Leuctra, and the 'Revolution' in Greek Tactics” argues that Theban tactics under Epaminondas were not particularly unique but had been used at previous times by other Greeks, including the Spartans. Hanson's view is bolstered by Richard Luginbill's “*Othismos* and the Importance of the Mass Shove in Hoplite Warfare.”

This triggered a controversy. Hans Van Wees' *Greek Warfare—Myth and Realities* argues that Greek warfare was less ritualistic, more mobile, and not as focused on the decisive collision as Hanson believes. A.D. Fraser's article "The Myth of the Phalanx-Scrimmage" also contends that the Greek phalanx was a looser, more versatile formation. J.E. Landon chips away further into the idealized form of hoplite warfare with *Soldiers and Ghosts*, arguing that light infantry and cavalry fit just as naturally into the larger context of Greek battle as the heavy infantry.

John F. Lazenby's *The Spartan Army* provides a closer look at the organization, training, and composition of Sparta's military. He analyzes in detail the Spartan army's campaigns from its beginnings in the Messenian Wars, to the fourth century BC collision with Thebes at Leuctra. His study of Spartan tactical movement and drill is complemented by J. K. Andersen's *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon*. Anderson focuses exclusively on the fourth century BC, but expands his study to include the Theban army's movements and strategies. George Cawkwell's "Epaminondas and Thebes" delves further into Epaminondas' creation and implementation of Theban strategies in the great battles with their Spartan adversaries.

Best's *Thracian Peltasts and Their Influence on Greek Warfare* chronicles the origins and development of peltasts, extolling their virtues while also acknowledging their limitations. Matt Trundle's *Greek Mercenaries: From the Late Archaic Period to Alexander* and Herbert Park's *Greek Mercenary Soldiers* build on Best's work. They continue the study of Greek mercenaries in all arms, from light infantry to heavy infantry phalanxes.

Strategies are not always formulated on strictly military considerations. Some of those factors can be cultural. Arther Ferrill's *The Origins of War* argues that the Greeks, even after fighting the

Persian combined-arms system, retained almost exclusive infantry phalanx armies for cultural reasons. J.E. Lendon's work also emphasizes such factors such as politics, society, and above all, culture. Lendon explores the competitiveness that marked Greek culture, arguing that it propelled strategy forward and was a contributing factor to the thrust and counter-thrust of the military history of the early fourth century BC. Charles Hamilton in *Agesilaos and the Failure of Spartan Hegemony* and Paul Cartledge in *Agesilaos and the Crisis of Sparta* are excellent studies, not only on the military events of the period, but their economic and demographic underpinnings as well. Hamilton studies the economic impact of the consolidation of landownership on Sparta's societal structure while Cartledge's study divorces Sparta's demographic problems from solely matters of reproduction. He links the Spartan *oligantropia* to the economic troubles Hamilton studies, along with the effects of maintaining pervasive internal security against a restive helot population. Richard Talbert continues in this direction with "The Role of Helots in the Class Struggle at Sparta.". Talbert's analysis focuses on mainly the social and economic roots of Sparta's problems. When considering Sparta's growing difficulties, a holistic approach, incorporating social, economic, and military factors, and their interactions, must be contemplated.

Xenophon's *Hellenika*, detailing the political and military developments of the period, is the main primary source for this paper. Other ancient sources include but are not limited to Herodotus, Thucydides, Diodorus Siculus, Pausanias, and Plutarch. As valuable as their contributions are, Xenophon is the only contemporary source for the early fourth century BC.

Introduction

Greek battles before the fourth century BC were dominated by hoplite warfare. It was simple, brutal, and effective. There was little room for maneuver, and victory called for a direct, massive push forward that the Greeks called *othismos*. The objective was to shatter, splinter, or drive back the opposing phalanx. Collisions between phalanxes, made up mainly of citizen armies, was war at its most brutal honesty. Demosthenes, the famous fourth century Athenian orator and statesman, would later laud in his *Third Phillipic* the “fair and open kind” of armed struggle practiced by hoplites while bitterly contrasting it with the Macedonian use of skirmishers, archers, and mercenaries:

For anciently I am informed the Lacedaemonians and all Hellenic people for four or five months, during the season only, invade and ravage the land of their enemies with heavily armed and national troops, and return home again: and their ideas were so old fashioned, or rather national, they never purchased an advantage from any; theirs was a legitimate and open warfare. But now you doubtless perceive, that the majority of disasters have been effected by treason; nothing is done in fair field or combat. You hear of Phillip marching where he pleases, not because he commands troops of the line, but because he has attached to him a host of skirmishers, cavalry, archers, and mercenaries and the like.¹

The objectives of this thesis are to study the changes in Greek battle tactics in the fourth century BC and explore the reasons for their evolution. There were a number of tactical innovations and I will evaluate the effectiveness of these tactics by studying the major battles of this period. I will further evaluate how effective the tactics that emerged were in ultimately defeating the Spartans.

In the classical period (ca 486 BC -323 BC), a Greek hoplite generally stood shoulder to shoulder in a formation eight men (sometimes twelve) deep called a phalanx. He wore between thirty and fifty pounds of armor cushioned by a tunic of stiffened linen and a closed helmet that limited sight and sound. His shins, exposed under the lower rim of the shield, were protected by bronze greaves. He

¹ Demosthenes, *Third Phillipic* 9.48-49

received the name “hoplite” from his armored array called a *hoplon*, featuring the large, concave three foot wide shield he carried in his left hand while wielding a six to eight foot spear in his right.

The shield gave the phalanx its strength. A hoplite could shield his torso and overlap his neighbor's shield to create a bronze wall not only to deflect enemy blows but to push the opponents back en masse. The concave, scalloped interior of the shield aided in that push and provided more protection as the hoplite pushed forward with all of his weight.

Made with a wooden core but faced with bronze, the “Argive” shield had two points of contact with the arm. The forearm passed through a wide bronze strap, called a *porpax*, positioned near the center of the shield to hold most of the twelve to fifteen pounds of weight.² The weight of the rim could be rested against a hoplite's shoulder, taking strain off his arms and aiding with the great push, the *othismos*. The *antilabe* was a smaller handle, gripped by the hand itself, located near the rim of the shield. Sometimes the *antilabe* would be made from a cord that ran along the inner edge of the shield but the effect was the same—the shield could be wielded in defensive and offensive manners.

Hoplites required little formal training but physical endurance was clearly a necessity. Steady nerves and rock solid courage were crucial to maintain the phalanx's cohesion in the face of the enemy's *othismos*. Holding the shield with the left hand resulted in leaving the hoplite's right flank vulnerable. That brought out the most important aspect of hoplite warfare—the trust the heavily armed infantrymen had in each other in the face of certain danger. Without that trust, the strongest armor and best tactics would be doomed to failure.

The Spartan poet Tyrtaeus, observing Spartan infantry in action during the Second Messenian War (685 BC-668 BC), gives the hoplite an early introduction on history's stage: “Go near, strike with a

² The *porpax* was removed on occasion when the shield was not in use to keep it from falling into the wrong hands, especially in Sparta where there was constant fear of helot revolts. Without the *porpax*, the shield was virtually impossible to carry.

long spear or a sword at close range, and kill a man. Set foot against foot, press shield against shield, fling crest against crest, helmet against helmet, and chest against chest, and fight a man, gripping the hilt of a sword or long spear.”³ While the mention of swords harken back to the time of the *Iliad*, “pressing shield against shield” is indicative of an early phalanx. The poet's exhortation to set foot against foot and shield against shield strongly suggests the development of closed formation fighting. It is also the first step towards centralized, organized units utilizing close order drill.

The fluid, flowing battles of the wars fought in the Homeric period and the Dark Ages (roughly 1200 BC-800 BC) featuring many missile attacks, breaks in the battles, and single combat between champions, were fought by the aristocracy. Battles were not very big, barely rating as skirmishes in later wars, because the aristocracy made up only a small portion of the population of a *polis*. Warfare and politics were seen as the primary pursuit of aristocrats. Mundane activities such as farming and trades diverted an aristocrat's attention and energy from more noble endeavors. The potential and necessity to increase the number of men under arms proved irresistible.

The hoplite and the form of battle Greeks excelled in found their origins in the seventh century BC. The men in the middle of this maelstrom of clashing shields and thrusting spears—the hoplites—were small land-owning farmers. Eligibility for military service was often determined by property ownership, which translated into the ability to afford the *accoutrement* of phalanx warfare⁴. Greek city states who lowered the property requirements for military service to include small farmers saw the ranks of their armies swell. Outnumbering the enemy was always an advantage. Armor and equipment improved their effectiveness.

Lowering property standards increased the raw number of men in the field. Van Wees writes that

³ Tyrataeus 8.31-34

⁴ J. Salmon “Political Hoplitess”, *Journal of Hellenic History* 97 (1977), 84-101, provides an interesting argument between the creation of hoplite warfare and the growth of democracy or at least a loosening of aristocratic control over the polis.

“A shield and spear were all that one strictly needed to be able to be counted as a hoplite, and when in the late fourth century the Athenian state began to issue military equipment to its citizens, a spear and a shield were all it provided.”⁵ A typical hoplite was a small farmer owning ten to fifteen acres worth an estimated 2,000-3,000 drachmas. Such a person could afford the full panoply. If all one needed was a shield and spear to be considered a hoplite, those two items would cost approximately twenty-five to thirty drachmas, what Van Wees estimates to be about a month's wages for a skilled laborer. The full array would be expensive, three months work or an estimated seventy-five to one hundred drachmas, but within the reach of a skilled craftsman. In an emergency, Greek city-states would conduct a mass levy (*pandemi*). The mass draft the Athenians conducted for the 424 BC invasion of Boeotia serves as a good example. The ideal of war as a gentleman's endeavor faded into the background when numbers became a prime consideration.

Not all of the men called up in a mass mobilization could afford hoplite armor so they found a place on the battlefield as skirmishers and missile throwing light infantry known as *peltasts*. Hoplites, able to afford armor, shields, and helmets, retained a degree of military elitism and even snobbery towards light infantry. The solidly middle-class hoplites possessed a hardy disdain for both aristocrats and the poor.

Observers in most Greek city-states saw farmers as good hoplite material because of their outdoor life. Farm life had other virtues. Xenophon, the gentleman adventurer-mercenary author of *Hellenika*, noted that such a life naturally trained men for service in a phalanx: “Farming teaches one to help others. So, too, in fighting one's enemies, just as working the earth, it is necessary to have the help of other people.”⁶

5 Hans Van Wees, *Greek Warfare—Myths and Realities* (London, UK: Duckworth Press), p.48

6 Xenophon, *Oeconomicus* 5.18-20

Thus Sparta came closest to fully emulating the ideal of the professional hoplite warrior. On the banks of the Eurotas River, it was felt that the ultimate infantryman was a man whose fitness resulted not from hard work but dedicated physical training. Spartan citizens were forbidden by law to engage in farming, the trades, or working with their hands, leaving these activities to the helots and *perioeci*. Property ownership requirements, observed in varying degrees in other Greek city-states, were in full force in Lacedaemon as the *homoioi* were expected to contribute enough to the public messes to feed three men daily.

Contemporary sources such as the Chigi Vase, a polychromatic artifact from the seventh century BC, depicting soldiers in hoplite armor and loose phalanxes, date the arrival of this form of warfare at around 650 BC⁷. It is about this time that Pheidon of Argos conquered large stretches of the Argolid and may have played a leading role in the Spartan defeat at the Battle of Hysaie (669 BC)⁸. This victory paved the way for Argos' early domination of the Peloponnese. The rapid expansion of Argive power suggests the use of the new, massed, armored phalanx and its superiority to open order warfare. Given the competitive ethos permeating Greek life, imitation of success was natural and Argos is credited as the birthplace of the phalanx and its distinctive shield⁹.

Eight men was the accepted depth of a Greek phalanx. The exact width has been harder to determine. It would stand to reason that the width of the phalanx needed to be long enough to avoid the danger of being outflanked. Thucydides' account of First Mantinea (418 BC)¹⁰ is the foundation of the traditional view of the massed phalanx and also documents its tendency to drift to the right:

7 Jeffery Hurwit, "Reading the Chigi Vase", *Hesperia*, Volume 71, No.1 (Spring 2002), 1-22. He also notes the conflicting views on the date of the vase.

8 This was the last major victory Argos achieved over Sparta.

9 Thomas Kelly in *History of Argos to 500 BC* documents historical evidence and inferences pointing to Argos as the birthplace of the phalanx and hoplite shield. He notes there is little hard evidence however, pp 85-86

10 The First Battle of Mantinea was fought between Sparta and a coalition of Mantinea, Athens, and Argos between the Archidamian and Ionian phases of the Peloponnesian War.

It is true of all armies that, when they are moving into action, the right wing tends to get unduly extended and each side overlaps the enemy's left with his own right. This is because fear makes every man want to do his best to find protection for his unarmed side in the shield of the man next to him on the right, thinking the more closely the shields are locked together, the safer he will be. The fault comes originally from the man on the extreme right of the front line, who is always trying to keep his own unarmored side away from the enemy, and his fear spreads to others who follow his example¹¹.

This rightward drift was a direct result of holding the shield in the left arm combined with the natural human tendency to seek maximum shelter in shock combat. This also meant the phalanx's most exposed and vulnerable side was its right flank. This explains why the best trained soldiers and units were stationed on the right. Victory in hoplite battles often came down to whose right flank was able to first destroy the enemy's left flank.

By the fifth century BC, hoplites had turned Greek warfare into infantry combat that was a ritualized trial of strength waged on any nearby convenient flat ground. Battles in the late Archaic (800 BC-500 BC) and Classical (c. 500 BC- 338 BC) periods tended to follow the same script. The armies would line up. Someone elected as a general would give a rousing speech followed by the sacrifice of a goat or sheep to gain the favor of the gods. Then both armies would charge each other. One phalanx would shove the other off the field or break it completely with the almost exclusive use of shock tactics. When the other army retreated or fled, the victors did not engage in a pursuit. This was not attributed to any feelings of mercy or tradition but rather the fear of losing cohesion of the phalanx and becoming vulnerable to a counterattack while strung out in pursuit. The objective was to end the fighting before the harvest and solve all dispute that came to blows on a single afternoon battlefield featuring limited infantry combat without serious casualties¹².

11 Thucydides, 5.71

12 Peter Krentz, "Casualties in Hoplite Battle." *Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies* 26, Vol. 1 (1985), pp13-20, cites casualty rates of 5% for the victors and 14% for losers in hoplite battles. When a small population base is taken into account with smaller city-states, these figures could constitute a disaster.

Even campaigns requiring more than one battle lacked the massive collateral damage, war crimes, rape, and murder that define “modern” war. These practices became commonplace during the twenty-seven year long Peloponnesian War (431 BC-404 BC). The days before 431 BC, Victor Davis Hanson observes, was one of the few times in history when bloodletting was geared to sparing lives rather than taking them.¹³

Hoplite battles in the period between the Persian invasion and the Peloponnesian War were full of such paradoxes. A herald with diplomatic immunity would arrive to solemnly announce a declaration of war and when it was to take effect. At the conclusion of the battle, the defeated side would ask for permission to recover the fallen. When enemy croplands were ravaged, no lasting damage remained and hoplite battles were fought on level ground, a premium in a mountainous country like Greece. Campaigning was limited to the spring and summer months between March and September to allow time to bring in the ripened harvest. The changes wrought in the Peloponnesian War would yield a much more bitter harvest in the next century.

Despite those changes, which included the introduction light infantry, a nascent role for cavalry, and even new hoplite formations, the phalanx retained its battlefield primacy. As the sun rose on the fourth century, the Greeks remained wedded to the phalanx. Even contact with Persian combined arms tactics could not push the phalanx from the center of Greek military thought. Arther Ferill ascribes this resistance to something deeper than the undeniable victories of the Greek phalanx over the Persians and holds that it was moral and cultural and not based upon rational analysis or military science.

Brian Todd Carey agrees with Ferrill that the Greek obsession with the phalanx was grounded in cultural factors, stating the phalanx was more than just a tactical formation, The phalanx represented a

13 Victor Davis Hanson, *Hoplites: The Classical Greek Experience*, (London, UK: Routledge Press), 1991

way of life and a code of moral conduct, Carey writes, that was more deeply engrained in Greece than in most military societies. Furthermore, Carey continues, the ritualistic nature of hoplite battles made change extremely difficult even after coming in contact with the Persians' combined arms tactical system¹⁴.

The hoplite phalanx would be pushed to the breaking point in the fourth century BC. The Corinthian War (395 BC-387 BC), the Boeotian War (378 BC-371 BC), and the beginning of the Theban Hegemony (371 BC-362 BC) not only saw trends born in the Peloponnesian War continue but accelerate in new directions. Greek warfare in the fourth century would no longer be confined to a contested strip of ground between phalanxes. Warfare expanded horizontally. City-states that were traditional land powers sought to create navies. Cavalry commands ranged far and wide on reconnaissance and raiding but also came back to do battle on the always important flanks. They nipped at the flanks of armies and stragglers strung out along the road long before they came to grips with the enemy. Light infantry, formerly regarded as ancillary, found new importance as they swarmed into mountain passes to seize the high ground and block army advances. Eventually they would go on the attack, seeking out the opposition and taking the fight to hoplites, sometimes with devastating results¹⁵.

The heavily armored hoplite infantry and their phalanx would still have considerable influence in the course that Greek history would follow. The evolution of Greek combat was not always a steady or regular linear progression. The inclusion of cavalry and light infantry peltasts surely made the fourth century battlefield a bewildering place at times for all soldiers involved. Hoplites expected to fight other hoplites. What they did not expect was the emerging combined arms approach to battle and

14 Brian Todd Carey, *Warfare of the Ancient World*, (New York, NY: Pen and Sword Press), 2006, p 53

15 Peltasts under the command of the Athenian general Iphikrates destroyed most of a Spartan regiment in hit and run attacks in the Battle of Lechaeum in 390 BC.

strategic approach to war in general. Still, the hoplite pressed on with the same doughty courage and conviction that was his trademark, convinced that the phalanx would withstand any challenge and the *othismos* would overcome all adversaries.

For non-Spartan Greeks, however, the adversary was the Spartan phalanx since Sparta's hegemony rested on her mastery of phalanx infantry tactics. The Theban, Athenian, and even Corinthians thus needed to find a way to defeat the Spartans on the battlefield. This was the driving force behind the changes in Greek battlefield tactics.

Sparta's hoplite armies did not remain static during this challenge to her hegemony. The Spartan phalanx became more versatile, mobile, and showed, to a point, a surprising battlefield agility and adaptability that belied the Lacedaemonian reputation for conservatism. The result was a generation long struggle for the leadership of Greece that may not have descended into the depths of utter savagery unleashed by the Peloponnesian War but was every bit of a life and death struggle that forever shaped the rest of Greek history.

Nemea, 394 BC

The Spartans won the Peloponnesian War in 404 BC but their harsh behavior after the war alienated their allies, particularly Thebes and Corinth. After a decade of tension between the former allies, the Corinthian War erupted in 395 BC as Thebes and Corinth joined forces with their old enemy Athens and even added Argos to their alliance for good measure against Sparta. A year after the opening battle of the war at Haliartus, the combined forces of Thebes, Athens, Corinth, and Argos clashed with Sparta and her Peloponnesian allies at a dry river bed about thirty miles southwest of Corinth near the site of Heracles' first mythological labor, the slaying of the Nemean Lion. Often regarded as the greatest of all hoplite battles, Nemea saw a Spartan army of at least 18,000¹⁶ confront an allied contingent of at least 24,000. The Battle of Nemea has also been mistakenly viewed as a pure hoplite clash straight out of the fifth century BC, portrayed as a “typical encounter of the pre-scientific age of Greek warfare”.¹⁷ Despite a Spartan flanking maneuver and the Theban use of a deep column phalanx, this perception of Nemea persists to this day.

Nemea is the perfect demonstration, both chronologically and tactically, of how Greek battlefield tactics began changing from their original fifth century BC form. Xenophon (c. 430 BC-354 BC) himself may have actually been in the Spartan ranks on that summer day, which makes his account even more valuable. The battle at Nemea began when the Thebans on the allied right flank moved first by taking a step to the right, pulling the rest of the army with them. They crossed the river, marched

¹⁶ Xenophon forgets to include the Tegeans and Mantineans in the Spartan order of battle but they are included in the account of the battle itself. This omission makes it impossible to estimate the size of the armies by adding up the totals.

¹⁷ M. Cary, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Volume 5, p 47

through a wooded area and emerged out of the tree line in front of the Spartan-led army that seemed surprised to see them. Aristodemos quickly issued the orders to the men to get into assigned positions and began deploying a flanking movement against the enemy left. Meanwhile, the Theban deep column routed the Peloponnesian allies and plunged ahead on a limited pursuit to confirm what they thought was a victory. They were completely unaware the Spartans themselves had outflanked the Athenians on the allied left and were rolling up that part of the army. The Spartans continued on their turn, cutting across the back of the other scattered allies. According to Xenophon, one bright Spartan infantryman shouted that it would be wiser to halt and allow the retreating, now panicked enemy to pass by so that they could be attacked on their unprotected side¹⁸. Aristodemos followed this shouted advice and inflicted nearly 2800 casualties on his disorganized opponents. Soon afterward, the Spartans set up a *tropaion* (trophy)¹⁹ in the middle of the battlefield to announce their victory, which cost only eight Spartan lives out of a total of 1100 Peloponnesian dead and wounded²⁰

Although the immediate tactical objectives of both armies were limited to the classical fifth century goals of breaking the enemy phalanx and/or driving it off the field, Kaupert's depiction of Nemea as a battle fought *noch ganz im altern Stil* (“still in the old style”) is proved inaccurate at the beginning of the battle. Aristodemos, the Spartan general marched his men over the bones of the long dead Lion in a deliberate flanking maneuver to the right while his Theban opponents attempted an equally unorthodox maneuver on the other side of the battlefield with the use of a deep infantry column. One reason for this popular view is the Spartan reputation for inherent conservatism and

18 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.2.22, Since hoplites carried their shield on their left arm, their right side would not be covered by the shield. The attacker would only have to penetrate the breastplate, assuming the hoplite was wearing one. Many hoplites went into battle with only a helmet, spear, and shield.

19 A *tropaion* was a monument to the victory, made from captured helmets, armor, and shields, usually placed at the turning point of the battle.

20 Diodorus, *Bibliotheca Historica*, 14.83.1

resistance to change. This is often traced back to Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, specifically his narrative of the debate at Sparta that led to the declaration of war against Athens in 432 BC. The Athenian admiral-turned-historian records the Corinthian dismay at their ally's hidebound tendencies:

An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a resolution and quick at carrying it out. You, on the other hand, are good at keeping things as they are; you never originate an idea, and your actions tends to stop short of its aim. Then again, Athenian daring will outrun its own resources; they will take risks against their better judgment, and still, in the midst of danger, remain confident. But your nature is always to do less than you could have done, to mistrust your own judgment, however sound it may be, and to assume the dangers will last forever...for they think that the farther they go the more they will get, while you think any movement may endanger what you all ready have²¹

The Spartan military system, along with its reputation for conservatism and unflinching bravery, suffered a crippling blow after their stunning defeat at Sphacteria in 424BC that ended with shocking *surrender* of nearly three hundred hoplites, including one hundred and twenty of the elite Spartiates. Compounding the humiliation was that the Athenian victory was won by peltasts and light infantry who wore down Spartan hoplites trapped on a deserted island. Sparta recovered militarily and morally after the tremendous victory at First Mantinea (418 BC)²² and Thucydides writes that Spartan soldiers were again regarded as the bravest in the world in of physical courage and determination. They were not seen as particularly skilled in battlefield movements: “Certainly as far as skill in maneuvering goes, the Spartans had the worst of it in every respect, but certainly they now showed that in courage they had no equals.”²³

These sentiments could explain the difficulty many have believing the Spartans not only changed tactics but became quite adroit developing new ones that in turn changed Greek warfare. A

21 Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, 1.70

22 First Mantinea was fought between the Archidamian and Ionia phases of the Peloponnesian War. It is not the battle that Epaminondas led his Thebans into in 362 BC.

23 Thucydides, 5.72

closer look at the historical record shows other examples of Spartan “out of the box” thinking. At First Mantinea, Aristocles and Hipponodias, Spartan officers unknown except for this battle, realized that following King Agis' orders to remove troops from the center would result in leaving a fatal gap in their lines. Their refusal to follow those orders, while later judged as insubordination, resulted in victory and represent an excellent example of unheralded Spartan tactical agility. On the strategic level, it must be noted that Sparta, traditionally a land power, ultimately emerged triumphant over Athens in the Peloponnesian War by building a navy with Persian subsidies. Spartan conservatism, while undeniable, did not result in chronic intractability.

The main aspects of this battle that differ from fifth century phalanx warfare are Theban use of a deep column and the attempted flanking movement by the Spartans. Many historians of the Battle of Nemea are drawn to the mechanics and intended use of the Theban phalanx. Other, and sometimes the same, historians focus on the Lacedaemonian flanking movement at Nemea. That debate revolves around whether it resulted from the natural tendency of hoplite armies to drift rightward as Thucydides observed or if the movement was planned.

According to Xenophon, the Thebans took the initiative in the battle, moving through a wooded area to attack Aristodemos before his army was deployed. The historian-soldier writes in *Hellenika* 4.2.18 : “...then they *wandered* to the right so that they might overextend the enemy with their wing.” Although the use of the word “wandered” does not seem to confer any great degree of skill, Xenophon does recognize the Theban movement as planned and having an actual goal. The problem was that the Thebans seized the initiative not only from the Spartans but their own allies. No one on either side was sure of the Theban plan or intentions.

J.K. Anderson takes the ancient source at face value, noting that both sides camped across the

river facing each other for several days, planning their dispositions and “...if Xenophon is to be believed, on the one side the Thebans made deliberate dispositions to with the Athenians and their other allies were compelled to conform.”²⁴ In other words, the allied forces spend several days discussing positions and strategies but the Thebans apparently schemed their way to the right side of the phalanx and followed their own strategy.

The Thebans decided to ignore the mutual agreement with their allies to fight this battle with a phalanx sixteen ranks deep, opting instead to make their phalanx “excessively deep.”²⁵ When the Thebans initiated battle by stepping to the right, their neighbors in the phalanx had to conform to the Boeotian movements, taking those steps as well, “even though they knew that there was a danger that they themselves might be outflanked and encircled.”²⁶ The alternative was to allow gaps to open up in the line, allowing the enemy to pour through.

The Thebans had been using deep phalanxes in one form or another for at least a generation. In the early phases of the Peloponnesian War at the Battle of Delium in 424 BC the Theban general Pagondas surprised the Athenians with a twenty-five shield deep phalanx, along with a number of other unpleasant surprises (reserves, ambushes, unusual cavalry deployments, skirmishers, charging downhill etc...). Thirty years later, soldiers from Attica guarded a deep Theban column as it attempted to smash through the left flank of an army commanded by Sparta.

The Theban adaptation of a deep phalanx is one such radical departure for the norms of phalanx warfare, eschewing the standard eight or twelve ranks. The greater depth certainly would create greater moral support as the formation marched and a narrower front would also make it easier to control.

24 J.K. Anderson, *Military Theory and Practice in the Age of Xenophon*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press), 1970, p 142.

25 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.2.18. Xenophon does not tell us how much deeper the Theban phalanx was.

26 Ibid, 4.2.18

However, what the deep phalanx had in bulk, it lost in mobility. The Thebans apparently were hoping that the greater mass would create more impetus for the *othismos*. It was the classic use of the power of numbers. This tactic was also uniquely tailored to the character of the Theban army. This formation could also be cobbled together with relative ease and launched forward with a minimum of training. The Thebans, like the rest of Greece (except for Sparta), did not possess a standing army. As a result, Greek armies not only lacked the experience and practice more sophisticated movements required but lacked Sparta's "...greater training of the men, and their capacity for maneuver due to subdivisions and control of their tactical units."²⁷ How would such a phalanx operate and what were its prospects for success? The mere fact that it was not immediately deployed by Greek city-states suggests that there were difficulties in implementing it. That debate raged in the fourth century BC and continues into our own.

One school of thought believes that the deeper the phalanx, the more power could be applied to the *othismos*, with the extra men in the rear supplying more momentum to overwhelm an eight or twelve man deep enemy formation. The Macedonian phalanx, clearly inspired by the Theban deep phalanx, operated partly on this principle. Polyibus (200 BC-118 BC), a Greek historian and author of *The Histories*, wrote that by the weight of their bodies, the rear ranks of the sixteen rank Macedonian phalanx aided their comrades by "pressing the forward ranks in the charge."²⁸ Robert Luginbill supports this theory with his observations of the "push" of a standard phalanx. He writes that since the length of the standard hoplite spear was two to three meters overall, only the first two ranks would be able to use their spears. He posits that the other ranks purpose was to lend weight for pushing.²⁹

The larger numbers, this line of thought continues, would also intimidate the enemy watching

27 A.W. Gomme, *Historical Commentary on Thucydides, Book I*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press), 1981, p 14

28 Polyibus, 18.30.4

29 Robert Luginbill, "Othismos in Hoplite Warfare." *Phoenix*, No. 48, Spring 1994, pp 58-59

this colossal battering ram approach. The morale of the men in the front would also receive a boost, knowing they have many more comrades behind them. Additionally, a deeper array is good insurance against the inevitable thinning of ranks in combat. This brings us to some interesting questions. How long are the men in the front supposed to fight? Are they ever relieved or do they fight until killed or wounded? If the men in the rear brought up to fight while those in the front retire, how is this done in such a thick formation?

There is an opposing school of thought. A.D. Fraser suggests that the deep formation prevented the ranks from thinning. He opposes the entire idea of *othismos*. He believes the function of a deep phalanx is something much more obvious than that of a titanic hammer. He argues strongly that common sense dictates that the rear ranks primary function was that of providing a reserve. The rear ranks also served the secondary purpose of preventing an enemy breakthrough but only on a tactical level. Fraser writes that the idea of a mobile body reserve had not become part of Greek battlefield tactics at this point³⁰

Fraser believes that instead of the headlong smash, the soldiers in the front would fight as long as they could in their armor under the broiling Greek sun before retiring to the rear (or getting killed) as the next man in the file moves up into the battle. A phalanx operating in such a “buzz saw” manner could overcome and cut through a smaller phalanx but Fraser never explains how exhausted front line troops retire to the rear of such a dense formation. Nonetheless, he finds support from Everett Wheeler who writes that a review of previous debates over the relative virtues of column and line formations leads to a conclusion that a phalanx eight ranks deep produced the maximum effect of shock while formations greater than eight deep yielded diminishing returns of shock effect and formations with a

30 A.D. Fraser, “The Myth of the Phalanx-Scrimmage.” *Classical Weekly*, No.2, 1942, p 16

depth greater than sixteen had little to no effect.³¹

Luginbill, however, maintains his position that the Theban innovation of a deep phalanx was to serve as a shock weapon. He contends that the idea of the additional hoplites in the rear ranks serving as reserves to step over their fallen comrades is simply incorrect. While this did actually happen since deaths were inevitable, hoplite battles were not decided by attrition. Luginbill says the battles simply did not last long enough for “reserves” to play the role Fraser assigns them. One phalanx or the other would crack and flee³²

The author of this thesis does not have an answer of how the phalanx actually worked but it is instructive to examine the question in the context of the advantages and disadvantages of a deep phalanx. At Nemea, Xenophon derides the Theban phalanx as “excessively deep.” His disapproval may be rooted in some way in his anti-Theban bias but there may also be a practical basis for it as well. In *Kyropaedia*, Xenophon, aside from inadvertently taking the side of the pro-push school in the *othismos* debate, asks: “When a phalanx is too deep for the men to reach the enemy with their weapons, what harm do you think they do to the enemy with their weapons, what harm do you think they do to the enemy or good to their friends?”³³

The Theban deep phalanx had in its ranks another problem—its virtual lack of mobility. It could only advance to the front or completely disintegrate if it was stopped. The Thebans themselves were part of the problem. The nature of their amateur militia precluded the development of any formal subdivisions that practiced movements and evolutions used in battle. The only direction the Theban phalanx could move at Nemea was in a straight line. This also left the muscle-bound formation

31 Everett Wheeler in *Cambridge History of Greek and Roman Warfare* (Sabin, editor) Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p 207.

32 Luginbill, p 59

33 Xenophon, *Kyropaedia*, 3.22

hideously vulnerable to flanking attacks.

The Spartans possessed first hand knowledge of the deep phalanx's limitations. A closer look at the battle of Munichia in 403 BC during the brief Athenian civil war brings to light the use of a deep phalanx by the Spartans themselves. Xenophon writes in *Hellenika* 2.11 that Kritias and the Thirty called the Spartan garrison for help in putting down the revolt begun by Thrasyboulos. The Spartans and their clients formed a column fifty deep and attempted to storm though a position held by Thrasybulus' ten deep army and lost. It must be pointed out that the Athenian democrats held an uphill position. Clearly Kritias' force came to grips with the enemy but were unable to push through. Was this because the incline was too steep for a classic *othismos* or was the deep column fighting “Fraser-style” defeated in piecemeal fashion? This brought out another handicap of the deep phalanx—the need for level ground. Nonetheless, Xenophon does not mention any attempts on the part of the Spartans and their allies to outflank the rebel Athenian position. It would seem apparent that Sparta saw, in leading this army from different Greek city-states, the limitations of the formation that so enamored Thebes.

The Spartan reaction at Nemea, once they noticed the oncoming enemy phalanx, was disciplined and without panic. The Spartans ordered their allies to take their assigned places and then “...they passed the word along the line that everyone should follow the lead company.”³⁴ This passage of *Hellenika* implies that the Spartans have a planned maneuver prepared and are following practiced doctrine. Xenophon goes on to write that “In this way, then, the Spartans too led their phalanx to the right, and they stretched their wing past the enemy to an extent that there were but six tribes of the Athenians arrayed against the Spartans, while the remaining four found themselves opposite the Tegeans”³⁵ In the following passage, Xenophon explicitly states the Spartans are attempting a flanking

34 *Hellenika*, 4.2.19

35 *Ibid.*

attack. The Spartans stopped briefly for a sacrifice to the goddess of the hunt, Artemis Agrotera, ...”and then charged the enemy, curving their line around that part of the enemy wing that their line extended beyond as to outflank it.”³⁶

These movements are radical departures from what is considered “standard” hoplite warfare. Scholars generally agree that both armies are clearly following a prepared course of action. Lazenby agrees with this observation, noting that Xenophon's account suggests that the course of the battle was something more than two armies edging to the right in the manner of Thucydides' account of First Mantinea. He asserts that this was borne out for the Spartans by virtue of Xenophon's remark that the word was passed along to follow the leading unit³⁷. Anderson believes the Spartans began their flanking attack by moving to the right in column before turning back into line to face the enemy when they had taken enough ground to the right.³⁸ Jones suggests that Sparta with its close-order drill and professionalism had their phalanx routinely face right and march in that direction. Although the segment would detach itself from the rest of the army, it would remain an extension of the line of battle. This small force would march in column a short distance, then turn left (See Figure One). The goal was to form a new front at a right angle to the rest of the army, like “the letter gamma.”³⁹

Jones' theory illustrates his theory on how the Spartan movement unfolded. It is certainly plausible that the flanking maneuver unfolded in this manner, especially when one considers the Spartan advantage in not only drill itself but command and control. Jones' theory needs sharper focus to answer a couple of questions.

Anyone with practical experience in close-order drill, would find that this maneuver took an

36 Ibid.

37 J.F. Lazenby, *The Spartan Army*, (Chicago, IL: Bolcazy-Carlucchi Publishing), 1985, p 139

38 Anderson, p 145

39 Xenophon, *Kyropaedia*, 7.5.1

inordinate amount of time, especially with an unexpected enemy phalanx emerging from out of the wood line. A supporter of Jones could argue quite credibly that superior Spartan organization not only ameliorated this development somewhat but actually did, pointing to Xenophon's narration that

...indeed they realized what was happening and immediately gave the order that everyone would arrange themselves for battle. After they were deployed in the way the allied commanders had assigned to each unit, they passed the word along the line that everyone should follow the lead company⁴⁰

Still others could argue that Aristodemos and his officers had the time to conduct a sacrifice before charging the allies. Xenophon also says the sacrifice happened when the armies were a stade (about 583 feet) away from each other. The time element question remains elusive but it is safe to say that the Spartan maneuver, once begun, was fairly quick, a testament to their training.

The answer might lie between both positions. Lazenby eliminates Jones' time consuming right angles. Oddly enough, Lazenby thinks the Spartan movement may have borne a striking resemblance to the Theban one. He argues that the orders given on the Spartan side to “follow the leader” suggest a move to the right in column while Xenophon says the Boeotians merely advanced to the right without any commands. Lazenby concludes that Xenophon's use of the same phrase to describe both maneuvers (without a mention of any Theban “follow the leader” orders), might actually mean the same thing, raising the possibility that both Spartans and Thebans were both moving to the right en masse.⁴¹ Simply put, Lazenby is probably correct in that the only difference between the Spartan and Theban mass movement to the right might have been in one shouted command to the Spartan file leaders.

This leads to the second question concerning the mechanics of the Spartan maneuver—what part of the phalanx was committed to the flanking attack? Arther Ferill writes that the effectiveness of

⁴⁰ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.2.16

⁴¹ Lazenby, p 143, note 8

the phalanx depended on the cohesion of its files [not ranks—Ferill's emphasis] and that the nature of the enemy phalanx assumed its opponent was also made up of heavy infantry with the same limitations on speed and mobility⁴². The basic combat element of a Greek phalanx, in all city states, was not the rank but the file, usually called an *enomotia* (although the word *stichos* is also encountered in the literature.) Wheeler refers to the file as the organizational building block of the phalanx⁴³. The man leading the file was an officer referred to as the *protostatai* and he was responsible for the men behind him, usually eight if the phalanx was at a standard depth. The *ouragos* (“tail leader”) was a steady man from the forty year age group positioned on the end to keep the men in the middle motivated, steady, and to push forward. His other duty was to not panic and keep the men calm when the clash of combat reverberated backwards through the phalanx. He was also to prevent desertion through any means he saw fit⁴⁴. If the detached flanking column takes a direct route to position itself alongside the enemy and then makes executes a right-face turn, only one of the *protostatai* is in the front of the attack. Additionally, one *ouragos* ends up on the front. In between are the men that may prove unsteady. It is still possible the detachment swings around so that its alignment is the same as it was in the original phalanx. This, again, would seem to take a lot of time to arrange especially in battlefield conditions but the Spartans were recognized by their contemporaries as masters of phalanx warfare and were certainly capable of achieving such a feat, perhaps using some version of a parade ground “gate turn”.

Xenophon in *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* attempts to explain Spartan drill movements, admitting that it is not easy to describe to those not trained under the laws of Lycurgus but “Even movements in which an instructor in heavy-armed warfare might look upon as difficult are performed

42 Arther Ferrill, *The Origins of War* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 1985, p. 144

43 Wheeler, p 206

44 Xenophon, *Polity of the Lacedaemonians*, 11.5

by the Lacedaemonians with utmost ease”⁴⁵ Somewhere in the countermarching and wheeling of companies Xenophon elucidates may lie the elusive gate turn.

The Spartans also utilized a system of command and control that was absent in other Greek armies. The Spartans marched into battle to the sounds of *auloi*, keeping a steady pace that ensured the cohesion of the ranks and files. When the Spartans began practicing this method of advance is unclear but according to Thucydides, they had been using it since at least First Mantinea (418 BC):

After this the two armies met, the Argives and their allies advancing with great violence and fury, while the Spartans came on slowly and to the music of many flute-players in their ranks. This custom of theirs has nothing to do with religion; it is designed to make them keep in step and move forward steadily without breaking their ranks, as large armies often do when they are just about to join battle.⁴⁶

Other Greek armies, overwhelming made up of citizen levies, advanced at an uneven march to a point about fifteen or twenty yards from the enemy before charging. Armies like the allied conglomeration at Nemea lost tactical cohesion because each *polis'* contingent operated as separate units. It was difficult to form a continuous mass. Gaps existed between the city state contingents and there was a definite danger that they could widen as the army advanced. Xenophon knew this from personal experience at Kunaxa, recording that he and his fellow mercenaries shouted at each other “not to run races” as they closed with the enemy⁴⁷.

With every contingent operating independently, in fifth century fashion, coordination of the line was an impossibility. For the allies at Nemea, this lack of communication and unity in command proved to be their undoing. What seemed to begin as a victory ended in defeat.

The Spartan penchant for discipline and drill paid dividends when Aristodemos heeded advice to halt the flanking movement in mid-stride. It also highlighted the value of communication and

45 Ibid, 11.13

46 Thucydides, 5.70

47 Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.8.19

organization .It made possible a phalanx that was more flexible and able to adapt to the unexpected. This movement, or rather cessation of movement, also underlines the unity of command in the Spartan army. The contrast with the lack of the same could be seen in the virtual massacre of the allies drifting back in unorganized fashion after routing the Peloponnesians. The Theban column, with its lack of internal organization and communication, could not do this nor could, as a whole, the allied army. The Thebans' Athenian allies provide the best example. The victorious four Athenian regiments who led the charge that defeated the Tegeans on the left were relatively unscathed but could not reform to attack the Spartan rear due to the insufficient discipline and lack of training that plague amateur units. The allies that survived the harrowing flight back to the Nemea river carried this lesson with them across it.

The Spartan reputation for impeccable drill and communication endured well beyond the fourth century. Three hundred years later, Plutarch, a *Boeotian*, paid tribute:

And yet the Spartans were the most skilled and experienced soldiers in the world, and in their training they paid special attention to the problem of changing formation without falling into confusion or disorder; each man was accustomed to take any one of his comrades as his right-hand or rear-rank man, and, whenever danger might threaten, to concentrate on that point, knit their ranks and fight on effectively as ever.⁴⁸

Nemea represented a watershed in the evolution of Greek combat. We see the beginning of several major changes, small at first but definite changes from the previous century. Phalanxes remain the mainstay of the Greek armies but they are becoming more mobile and agile. Xenophon's narrative, the only contemporary account in existence, seems to be incomplete when it comes to other innovations and developments.

In describing the initial line up for the battle, Xenophon mentions that the Spartans have six hundred horse, accompanied by three hundred Cretan archers and at least four hundred slingers from

48 Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 23.3

Marganeis, Letrinoi, and Amphidolia. The Thebans and their allies brought a cavalry force of eight hundred Boeotians, six hundred Athenians, and about one hundred and fifty other horsemen. This brings up a major question—why did the cavalry not play any role in the battle?

The Greek city states (south of Thessaly) were never endowed with a deep interest in cavalry forces. Combat remained mainly an exercise in shock tactics. Lacking stirrups and even saddles, Greek horsemen were totally unsuited for slamming into massed enemy formations and the horses had the innate intelligence not to charge into a bristling hedgerow of bright, pointed spears. Furthermore, the mountainous terrain of Greece made large scale cavalry operations almost impossible. Generals often anchored their flanks on terrain features such as hills and mountains, narrowing the options for cavalry even more. This led to a neglect of training mounted forces. In Sparta, in particular, cavalry was generally looked down upon as less fit soldiers would be assigned mounts. Boeotia, with its open plains, did possess dedicated, mounted soldiers but, as we've seen, cavalry was not a shock weapon and could do little against a phalanx. The closest that cavalry came to being used in direct combat was as missile troops, usually throwing javelins from horseback. Trying to throw off such an unsteady platform limited their battlefield utility but horsemen had other useful martial skills, such as scouting and raiding. Their most important tactical ability would be screening and protecting the flanks and, if victorious, pursuit.

It would seem strange that such an expensive force would be raised, transported, and then not used by either army. It is even stranger that Xenophon, a noted horseman, would neglect to acknowledge any mention of cavalry forces. Compounding the mystery is that there were plenty of opportunities for cavalry on both sides to play a major role. Anderson realizes that there is no mention of any active cavalry role but feels it is safe to presume both sides posted their horsemen on the wings.

He goes on to speculate that the whole of the Spartan cavalry was on the right wing and sufficient to hold the Athenian mounted men in check⁴⁹. In all likelihood, the Spartans probably would have stationed their cavalry alongside fellow Spartan hoplites. This brings up the question of whether the Spartan cavalry, if stationed on the right, would impede any Spartan flanking movement. Without an eyewitness account of this part of the battle, speculation is all we have. In all likelihood, any Spartan cavalry on the right would have been stationed out of the way (perhaps even behind the phalanx) as not interfere with such a maneuver. However, with respect to Anderson, there are other intriguing possibilities for the horsemen of both sides that need to be considered. It has been shown how vulnerable the Theban deep phalanx was to flanking attacks. The most natural place to find the Boeotian cavalry at Nemea would have been on the right side of the allied army to protect that flank. Had the allied leadership deployed the cavalry in this manner, the six hundred Athenian horse would have been on the left flank with their Attic countrymen and come into contact with and slowed down or even broken up Aristodemos' flanking maneuver. Even if the allied cavalry had arrived after their compatriots overwhelmed Sparta's associates, they could have saved many lives by screening the disorganized retreat back to the river.

The failure to use cavalry was not confined to one side. If the Spartans had used cavalry for its most natural function—scouting---they would not have been surprised to hear the Theban *paean* booming so close. Even in a forested area, the cavalry could have warned Aristodemos that the enemy, especially in such a deep formation, was approaching. Taking this point further, deploying the Spartan cavalry on the river banks would have resulted in an even earlier alert.

Another interesting omission is the role of peltasts. Xenophon records a preliminary

49 Anderson, p 148

engagement between the allied peltasts and the advancing Spartan army at Epieikeia, even acknowledging considerable success on the part of the missile troops: “As the Spartans invaded by way of Epieikeia, the light-armed troops of the enemy at first were able to hurl javelins and shoot arrows at them from above, and in this way did great harm to them”⁵⁰.

After the peltasts of the Theban alliance draw first blood, Xenophon conducts a role call of both armies. First he mentions the seven hundred archers and slingers on the Spartan side. He continues with a reasonable estimate of light troops on the allied side. Then they disappear.

It could be that both sides held their light infantry back to guard their camps but that would seem to be a waste of their talents. Peltasts, unencumbered by the armor hoplites wore, could move through rough terrain and seize hill tops. They could use missile weapons to shower larger formations from a distance and move quickly out of reach of the hoplite's spear. The Bradfords assert that peltasts were used almost as cavalry, to rush in and throw spears and javelins at heavy infantry formations and then rush back out of reach of hoplite spears⁵¹.

The exact site of Nemea is still a mystery but Xenophon mentions that the battle began after the allies' phalanx marched through an overgrown area. Is it possible that the area was too overgrown for cavalry to operate effectively? If peltasts were “used almost like cavalry” as the Bradfords contend, this area would have been an excellent place for them to scout ahead. They might have also been in a better position to deal with any enemy light infantry if there were any in Spartan employ to be encountered. After emerging from the “overgrown area”, or possibly forest, the peltasts, unable to withstand close combat with an armored phalanx, would have deployed to the flanks. Since the Spartan flank attack succeeded, any resistance the peltasts put up must have been overcome in short

⁵⁰ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.2.14

⁵¹ Alfred and Pamela Bradford, *With Arrow, Sword, and Spear: A History of Warfare in the Ancient World*. (Boulder, CO: Greenwood Publishing Group), 2001, p 97

order trying to stop an oncoming phalanx, perhaps too quickly for anyone to notice. And the Spartans may have, as Anderson suggests, actually had cavalry on that flank. The Theban deep column on the right would have needed flank protection but any peltasts there would have been caught up in the subsequent breakdown of order after overcoming the Peloponnesian left.

Although Nemea was far removed from a “typical” hoplite battle and put on display the changes that were taking place in Greek combat, there were some aspects of this clash that would not have been out of place at Tanagra a half century earlier. The first most noticeable holdover from the fifth century was the placement of the best troops, and strength of the army, on the right flank opposite of the opponent’s weakest troops. The Spartans placed the whole of their contingent on the right side because they were the strength of the Peloponnesian League army not only because of their training but by virtue of their unit integrity. This is what allowed them to perform, with confidence, complicated maneuvers. The best troops with the finest training moving with the utmost speed were needed on the right to win before the left fell apart. This was the course the Battle of Nemea ultimately took and the Spartans used this foreknowledge to their advantage. Conversely, the Thebans, with or without their allies approval, sought to do the same. Believing themselves to be the best soldiers in the allied army as well as having the most experience in the deep phalanx tactics, they placed themselves opposite the Achaeans, whose placement on the far left reflected the lack of faith the Spartan leadership had in this particular set of “allies”.

Greek infantry seldom pursued beaten enemies. Hoplites were ill-equipped for long pursuits and no commander wanted his force to scatter and lose cohesion. This was a distinct possibility since command and control was generally non-existent the minute the phalanx began moving. After shattering the enemy, a victorious force would be disorganized, strung out over the battlefield, and

vulnerable to a counterattack from an enemy who rallied—an enemy like the Spartans at Nemea for instance. There was the recovery of the fallen to be considered as well and the ancient precepts against the shedding of unnecessary blood may have come back into some form of cognition after the horrors of the latter stages of the Peloponnesian War. Sparta in particular claimed to be operating under the laws of Lycurgus, who forbade pursuit for an ingeniously cynical reason:

When they had conquered or routed an enemy, they pursued him far enough to make their victory secure by his flight, and then at once retired, thinking it ignoble and unworthy for a Hellene to hew men to pieces who had given up the fight and abandoned the field. And this was not only a noble and magnanimous policy, but it was also useful. For their antagonists, knowing that they slew those who fought them, but showed mercy to those who yielded to them were apt to think that flight more advantageous than resistance.⁵²

The superb Spartan control and command combined with exceptional drill served two purposes at Nemea. The first, halting this flanking column at the perfect moment, was a tactically wise course of action in that it allowed the Spartans to stab at the fleeing enemy's “unprotected side” as they ran past with minimal danger to Spartan soldiers. Secondly, halting the column also saved precious Spartan lives. This move reveals that the innovative flanking maneuver may have had its origins in reasons other than operational efficiency.

Sparta was suffering from an acute demographic crisis. The issue was not only sheer numbers and matters of reproduction but Sparta's military resources were stretched thin by commitments outside Laconia. Making matters worse were the internal security requirements needed to keep an increasingly restless helot population under control. Certain cultural factors contributed to a cycle that made the problem worse as time wore on compounded by land ownership issues.

Turning to Herodotus, nearly 5,000 Spartan *homoioi* marched out to do battle at Plataea in 479

⁵² Plutarch, *Lycurgus*, 22.5. It must be noted that Plutarch is writing in the second century AD and his idealistic tone may be the result of his glorification of the Greeks of the fifth and fourth centuries BC. By the Corinthian War, a new generation of infantrymen may be far enough removed from the largely naval massacres of Lysander not to be effected by the bitterness of the twenty-seven year Peloponnesian War.

BC, supported by 5,000 *perioeci* (who in turn were supported by 35,000 helots)⁵³ Throughout the fourth century, the Spartans would turn more and more to freemen, freed helots (*neodamodeis*), mercenaries and their allies to shoulder more of the military load⁵⁴. By Leuctra, Xenophon reports there were only 1,000 full Spartan citizens on the battlefield. Sparta's demographic problems had many origins and they began to effect Spartan military potential as early as Nemea. We will explore those reasons and their ramifications later but we can see the beginning of an aversion to bloody frontal assaults that would result in heavier Spartan casualties. Carrying the brunt of a lot of these kind of assaults were the Peloponnesian allies. This began to effect Sparta's battlefield strategies as their allies found themselves bleeding more and more for victories Sparta regarded as her own.

Sparta not only remained per-eminent in phalanx warfare after Nemea but she had improved it. It was more mobile and acted somewhat like the future Roman maniple though the internal subdivisions moved towards one goal rather than independently. Anderson also notes that Attic pottery of the late fifth century and early fourth century BC show hoplites wearing less or lighter equipment. This is most noticeable in helmets. Anderson informs readers that the Spartans in particular seemed to have traded their Corinthian helmets for the plainer *pilos* metal cap as early as Sphacteria⁵⁵. Hanson adds that the *pilos*, omission of thigh, arm, and even breastplates were indicative of a desire for more mobility and fluid battlefield movements and tactics.⁵⁶

The Thebans and their allies, despite the use of a deep phalanx, were still using that formation largely as it had been designed. If a formation such as a deep phalanx existed specifically as a shock weapon, there would be little incentive to change their hoplite array as radically as Anderson and

53 Herodotus, *The Histories*, 9.28

54 Charles Hamilton, *Agesilaus and the Failure of Spartan Hegemony*, and Paul Cartledge, *Agesilaus and the Crisis of Sparta* provide excellent in depth analysis of Sparta's demographic and economic and their military impact.

55 Anderson, pp 28-29

56 Hanson, p 64

Hanson contend Sparta had. Although it appears the cavalry and peltasts did little for either side at Nemea, their presence indicates that both sides were at least aware of their capabilities.

An assessment of what was essentially a battle between a fifth century militia force and a fourth century professional army is clear. Cold, calculated Spartan professionalism defeated an energetic, unfocused militia. Until the Thebans could develop similar command and control capabilities as their Spartan opponents, develop new tactics to counter them, and ultimately move out of the fifth century, future battles would resemble Nemea and have the same results.

Coronea, 394 BC

A few months after Nemea, Agesilaus, the Eurypontid king of Sparta, descended out of Thessaly through the famed pass of Thermopylae into western Boeotia. Agesilaus' force was a veteran army, spearheaded by his Spartans, newly freed helots (*neodamodies*), a large contingent of Asiatic Greeks and many mercenaries, supplemented by Orchomenian and Phocian hoplites. The Thebans led another mixed force, supported by Athens, Argos, Corinth, and a host of minor states against Agesilaus.

The tactical aspects of the Battle of Coronea, fought in the summer of 394 BC, followed quite closely those of Nemea. The Spartan right easily overwhelmed the confederates' left as the Argives stationed there panicked and broke before contact was made. The Thebans, again placing themselves on the right flank, tore through the Orchomenians on Agesilaus' left and rampaged towards the baggage train. Agesilaus, when he realized the battle was not over, wheeled his phalanx completely around and charged back the way they had come. The Thebans and their allies, many of them survivors from Nemea, stopped ransacking the baggage train when they caught sight of the Spartan phalanx bearing down on them. They quickly formed ranks and charged the Spartans head on, causing a frightening collision that imprinted itself on the minds of everyone present, including Xenophon, who called the battle of Coronea “a battle unlike any other in our time.”⁵⁷

No ancient source, not even Xenophon, who was an actual participant on Agesilaus' side, gives an exact number for either side gathered for battle. Xenophon writes in his biography of Agesilaus that both armies were roughly the same size and mainly hoplites: “These masses of infantry, as far as the eye can see, were of duly balanced strength, while as near as could be the cavalry on either side was numerically the same.”⁵⁸ This passage also alludes to the presence of cavalry and in *Hellenika* 4.3.15,

⁵⁷ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.3.16

⁵⁸ Xenophon, *Agesilaus*, 2.7

this well traveled soldier of fortune informs readers that Agesilaus “had many more peltasts than his opponents...”. Lazenby, who admits to be reduced to guesswork, estimates that Agesilaus probably commanded a force of about 15,000⁵⁹. It is not inconceivable that the Boeotians and their allies, since they were fighting on their home ground, probably had a slightly larger force.

The disposition of the armies can tell a historian much about the course a battle will take before the first soldier puts on his armor. We know from *Hellenika* that Agesilaus placed himself on the right flank of his army⁶⁰. Presumably, the Spartan regulars were there with him under his direct command. This location ensured that the Spartans would be facing the allies' weakest troops. The weakest part of the Peloponnesian League army gathered at Coronea was also on the left. The Orchomenians were on the far left once again, a clear indication that their fighting abilities were not held in the greatest regard by Sparta. It becomes clear that the Spartan battle plan was to win the fight by turning the enemy's left before their own left collapsed. It was also a cold blooded decision on the part of Sparta to sacrifice her allies, using allied lives and bodies to slow down and weaken the better part of the enemy army but it made crude military sense. The fully intact Spartan contingent could win the battle using tactics they had trained with against the weakest part of the enemy. This continuing practice would not help future relations between the Lacedaemonians and their allies.

More reliable troops filled the middle of the army. Arrayed beside his Spartans, Agesilaus had under arms the remainder of the Ten Thousand who had marched to Kounaxa and back. The middle of the army was occupied by a collection of enthusiastic mercenaries from Greek cities in Asia Minor. Most interestingly is the attendance of *neodamodeis* (“new men”) in Sparta's battle line.

The reliance on non-citizen soldiers by Sparta have been called by Paul Cartledge “the most

59 Lazenby, *The Spartan Army*, p 144

60 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.3.16

serious breach in the principle of the citizen militia.”⁶¹ The reliance on non-citizens and mercenaries is often explained as a response to a demographic crisis. Aristotle refers to this demographic decline as *oliganthropia*. Sparta's odd societal organization provided a short term response to this situation. Cartledge writes that to compensate for this serious decline of Spartiate manpower, Sparta began tapping into the abundant reserves of helots. The helots were little more than slaves in Lacedaemonia but the *perioikoi* (“neighbors”) were tradesmen, craftsmen, and even independent farmers. Although they were not full citizens or part of the *homoioi*, they were an integral part of the Spartan army.

The inclusion of “the neighbors” was a practice that dates back to at least the Persian Wars, long before there was a hint of a manpower problem in Sparta. Herodotus includes in the line-up of Greek forces before the Battle of Plataea, a description of the Spartan force as including 5,000 Spartiates and 5,000 *perioikoi*. In 479 BC, Spartiates and *perioikoi* seem to be established in separate units, but nearly a century later, citizens and non-citizens served together in the ranks in the same units. The Spartans banded them together, discarding any form of organization based on tribe or locality as they had been earlier. It appears that “men were just drafted in as the army needed them.”⁶² This practice was not just a response to shrinking citizen manpower but as a way of strengthening the army as a whole.

Van Wees maintains that the mobilization of helots and ex-helots and the hiring of mercenaries as hoplites by Sparta was not quite as radical as it might seem at first glance. He backs this assertion with hard statistics, noting that *perioikoi* accounted for 70% of the infantry at Thermopylae, half at Plataea, again 70% later at Leuctra. He however agrees with Cartledge that the Spartans often sent ex-helots and mercenaries out on expeditions to far away locales and usually outside of the Peloponnesse

61 Paul Cartledge, *Agasilaos and the Crisis of Sparta*, (London, UK: Gerald Duckworth and Company), 1987, p 40

62 Ibid, p 42

but always under Spartiate leadership. Gylippus' expedition to Sicily certainly seems to fit this model and Agesilaus' campaign against Persia had a large mercenary component. It was only natural that Agesilaus brought these soldiers, who had proved themselves in Asia and Thessaly, into the war against Thebes. Another reason *neodamodeis*, *perioikoi*, and mercenaries had such a presence in Spartan armies in the early fourth century is so elementary it sometimes escapes notice-- the need to leave Spartiates at home to keep under control a large helot population, which outnumbered the citizens nearly ten to one. The helot revolt of 464 BC and Kinadon's 399 BC plot were reminders of the dangers lurking at home from a servile population who would "like to eat the Spartans raw."⁶³

Let us return to the scene of the battle. When news that the Thebans had shattered the left flank reached Agesilaus, Xenophon writes that the Spartan king immediately "countermarched his phalanx around and led it against the Thebans."⁶⁴ This again is a tribute to Spartan drill though it is impossible to know if Agesilaus's soldiers, thinking the battle was over, stayed in formation during the impromptu garlanding ceremony. It would seem possible that the Spartans stayed in rough formation since the Argives did not stand and fight, so getting his men back into place must not have been difficult plus it must be remembered that all the men had assigned places in the ranks.

Lazenby attempts to describe how the countermarch might have been performed: "...whereby each man in the file about-turned, and while the original rear-man (now in the front) stood fast, the original file leader (now at the rear) led his men to take up their places again, in their original order, in front of the rear man, thus giving the impression of advancing."⁶⁵

The exact mechanics of this maneuver are not clear. Any attempt at a "gate turn" would not work unless the other files were doing the same thing. The most probable, efficient, and fastest course

63 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.3.6

64 Ibid, 4.3.18

65 Lazenby, p 146

of action would be for the original file leader to move back down the length of the formation to the new front of the file, followed immediately by the next man. This could continue until the file was completely “turned around.”

Agesilaus led his men back over the ground they had covered, straight for the Thebans who remembered the primary lesson of Nemea—maintaining cohesion. Xenophon says that they closed up ranks and “stoutly advanced.” Somehow, the Thebans were able to pull their soldiers away from rummaging through the baggage train, assemble, mass effectively, and charge back across the battlefield at the Spartans. This would indicate better communication and some form of rudimentary organization. Since the Theban contingent had been separated from the rest of the army, it might have been easier for the officers and their helpers to bring fellow Thebans together. The recent experience of Nemea was also a good spur to action. Clearly, the Thebans, many of whom no doubt fought at Nemea a few months earlier, resisted the urge to plunder and kept together as a disciplined, organized formation.

There is no evidence in *Hellenika* that the Thebans were using an exceptionally deep phalanx at Coronea. A smaller phalanx would be easier to reassemble and take much less time in such an adrenaline charged situation. Using experience as a guide, all that is required for a hasty muster is to have the first rank step into place and let the rest of the files fill in, regardless of the place an individual infantryman was originally occupying. This would be the ideal solution for this kind of situation; a neophyte army leavened with veterans of Nemea.

The Thebans and Spartans, now facing in the opposite direction from where they had started the battle, slammed into each other, beginning a clash reminiscent of the mid fifth century BC rather than the Corinthian War:

Crashing together their shields, they shoved, they fought, they killed, and were killed, and finally, although some of the Thebans broke through to Mount Helicon, many were killed there as they tried to retreat there.”⁶⁶

Plutarch, born in Boeotia and writing centuries later, presents a different view from the honorary Spartan. He states in *Agesilaus* that the Thebans did break through the Spartan line but that “The Thebans withdrew in good order to Mount Helicon, proud of their achievement in keeping their contingent undefeated.”⁶⁷ Diodorus takes no stand on the issue and dutifully reports that six hundred Boeotians fell along with three hundred and fifty of Agesilaus' men. Modern scholars concede the victory to Sparta on the grounds that the Thebans requested a truce to bury their fatalities. Agesilaus' victory is not considered as overwhelming as Aristodemos'. Nicholas G. L. Hammond opines that “The Thebans alone distinguished themselves” and “In weight, swordsmanship, and stamina, the Thebans in their deep formation more than held their own.”⁶⁸

The strange course of the battle, resulting in both armies completely reversing themselves and practically fighting two engagements, has led many historians to question why Agesilaus elected for a full frontal assault instead of a flanking maneuver like the one successfully employed at Nemea. Plutarch writes in *Agesilaus*: “At this point, Agesilaus might have easily won a victory if he resisted the impulse to make a frontal assault on the Thebans, and had wheeled so as to take them in the rear after they had passed”⁶⁹ Xenophon praises his friend's valor but also criticizes the choice of tactics. His solution is not a repeat of Nemea however. He advocates opening the ranks and letting the Thebans escape:

And it was here, one may say, that Agesilaus proved his courage beyond a doubt: for he did not choose what would have been the safest course for himself and his men, which would have been

66 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.3.19

67 Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 18.2

68 N.G.L. Hammond, *A History of Greece until 322 BC*, (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press), 1971, p 457

69 Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 18.3

to let the troops marching against him pass through and then attack them from behind; instead he met and came to blows with the Thebans head on.⁷⁰

Plutarch attempts to explain Agesilaus' choice of tactics. He writes that the king's Spartan reserve slipped in the middle of battle and his emotions got the best of him at a critical junction. Plutarch maintains that Agesilaus “allowed himself to be carried away by his natural ardor and fighting spirit”⁷¹. It is also quite possible that Agesilaus' hatred for Thebes, stemming from an affront rendered at Aulis in 396 BC, still festered in the king's mind, a view Lazenby develops⁷². Lazenby also suggests the possibility that the Spartan king was thinking of the situation beyond the immediate battlefield. At this point in the battle, the Boeotian contingent was isolated from its allies and outnumbered by a fairly intact Spartan army. Agesilaus may have seen a battle of annihilation beginning to take shape and he must of thought he had a splendid opportunity to knock out Sparta's most dangerous foe out of the war in one decisive clash. When the Theban front proved impossible to splinter, the Spartans ended up employing the tactic originally discarded:

They parted their ranks and allowed the enemy to pass through, and then, when the Thebans had passed beyond them and were moving in a looser formation, the Spartans followed, broke into a run, and attacked them from the flanks⁷³

Anderson argues Agesilaus had done nothing more than put his men in the Theban's escape route, thus ensuring another fight. He dismisses Plutarch's noble assertions of Theban prowess in pushing through the Spartan phalanx, bringing to attention that the Thebans had up to this point deliberately avoided going head to head with the Spartans. At both Nemea and Coronea, the Thebans had started the battle on the right flank, the furthest possible position away from the Spartans. The

70 Xenophon, 4.3.19

71 Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 18.4

72 Agesilaus attempted to preform a sacrifice in front of his army at the site of Agememnon's departure for Troy just before embarking on his Persian campaign. Not only did the Thebans refuse to join, but disrupted the ceremony.

73 Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 18.9

Theban assault was something that happened almost by accident since circumstances had put the Boeotians in a position where they were “compelled to fight”⁷⁴.

Anderson writes that the Spartans opened their ranks to let the Thebans escape. He enlists Xenophon's help, noting that some of the men at Coronea had done the same thing against Persian chariots at Kunaxa⁷⁵. Although the Spartans were acknowledged masters of mass drill movements, this stratagem probably would not be as smooth as many readers are led to believe. It would be extremely difficult for men locked in combat in such a thick formation to carry out such an operation without some measure of confusion.⁷⁶

Lazenby writes that an attempt by the Spartans to open ranks to facilitate a Theban escape would be difficult and he believes the Thebans did not take advantage of any escape routes provided by Agesilaus. He believes that Xenophon may be revealing some bias towards his guest-friend Agesilaus and was attempting to paint his failure to destroy the Thebans as a somewhat favorable outcome. He reasons that since Xenophon was an eyewitness, his account must be seen as factually accurate. If Xenophon had written that Agesilaus had attempted to destroy the Thebans and failed, it would have diminished the Spartan king's reputation. Claiming Agesilaus opened ranks to let the Thebans escape allows him to “save face” but Xenophon's objectivity is called into question since it would be nearly impossible for an army of several thousand to part ranks to let another army of several thousand to run between the columns. For this reason, one can conclude that the Thebans fought their way clear.

Xenophon does not tell us if the Thebans attempted to use an “excessively” deep phalanx at Coronea. It is also not clear if the Thebans were attempting to completely crush the men of Orchomenus opposite them or attempt a possible envelopment. Antonio Santosuosso argues that the

74 Anderson, p 153

75 Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 1.8.20

76 Anderson, p 153

development of the encounter suggests an attempted envelopment. His observation that the end result of the battle highlights a higher sense of discipline and toughness among the Thebans is indisputable⁷⁷ However, the headlong rush towards the baggage train after the rout of the Orchomenians seems to argue against any such Theban planned course of action. The Thebans overwhelmed the Peloponnesian left wing, pillaged the camp, reversed their front and charged the Spartans head on. They might have left the field to the Spartans but they were far from beaten, “proud of the achievement that they had kept their contingent undefeated.”⁷⁸

This Theban achievement was brought about by closing their ranks and advancing in close order, or as Xenophon reported, “stoutly.” Lazenby presumes this to mean that the Thebans massed together in a deeper formation or that they simply “closed up”⁷⁹. He cites Asklepiodotos' *Taktika 4.1* as a guide, which describes the closest tactical order as men locking shields and standing with only one cubit (approximately 18 inches/45.7 centimeters), between their shoulders. Not only does this gambit turn a phalanx into a veritable spear, concentrating striking power on one point, but it represents a more flexible phalanx. The unique shape of the Boeotian shield certainly helped (See Figure Four), allowing a dense formation to advance with soldiers utilizing an underhand grip on their spears and reducing exposure of their faces and necks the overhand grip would entail. The concentration of force on one point could also be seen, on a smaller scale, as a precursor to Leuctra and Mantinea.

The armies were camped out on open country but Xenophon, as he does with the case of Nemea, reports nothing of cavalry or peltasts. This is even stranger than his account of Nemea since he took part in the battle at Coronea and there is no mention of any hills or swamps to anchor a phalanx flank. Presumably, the open country of Corona would be as suitable place as any in Greece for large

⁷⁷ Antonio Santosusso, *Soldiers, Citizens, and Symbols of War*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press), 1976, p 103

⁷⁸ Plutarch, *Agesilaus*, 18.5

⁷⁹ Lazenby, p 146

scale use of cavalry. Agesilaus also had made great use of cavalry while fighting Persia the year before. Unless there is a compelling topographical reason, the absence of cavalry, especially horsemen with experience, is baffling. The reason why Xenophon makes no mention of cavalry is due to a simple tactical reason. In a battle with massed shield formations, auxiliary corps would be kept out of the fighting because any attack they would mount would fail against such a wall of shields⁸⁰.

Cavalry faced limitations for several reasons in ancient Greece. Although the rocky terrain and emphasis on the heavy infantry phalanx mitigated against the horse soldiers, the stirrup and horseshoe had no place in Greek horsemanship. Horses were also unstable fighting platforms. It was exceedingly difficult to throw javelins or spears from horseback, especially when on the move. Peltasts did not have this problem.

The role of peltasts at Coronea is even more of a mystery. Xenophon states that Agesilaus possessed more light infantry than did the Theban alliance⁸¹. Although peltasts do not make an appearance in Xenophon's narrative and are often ignored in other ancient sources, some scholars believe that their presence can be assumed⁸². Others attribute this omission as snobbery or, in the case of pottery, artistic viewpoints rather than any concern with accurately depicting the event⁸³.

Contrasting these views is J.G.P. Best. He reminds readers that the center of the Peloponnesian League line at Coronea was made up of Herippidas' mercenary force, veterans of the march upcountry to Kunaxa. Best contends that a unit of Ionians, Aeolians, and Hellespontines had peltasts integrated in their ranks, stating that during the advance of Cyrus' army, Greek hoplites and peltasts did not constitute separate units but both were represented in various contingents, each commanded by its own

80 Victor Davis Hanson, *The Western Way of War*, (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press), 1994, p 183

81 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.3.15

82 Wheeler, p 221

83 A.M. Snoddgrass, *Arms and Armour of the Greeks* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press), 1967, p 85

Greek mercenary leaders.⁸⁴ The peltasts, and horsemen too, in Agesilaus' army came from the Greek cities in Asia Minor under Spartan control. Peltasts could have only been among the Asia Minor contingent of Agesilaus' army since the rest of Herippidas' and Agesilaus' troops were only hoplites⁸⁵. Another look at Xenophon's account of the Battle of Coronea shows that these troops “ran out from Agesilaus' phalanx and advanced together on the run; when they came to within spear-thrusting distance, they routed their opponents.”⁸⁶ Best believes this is the role peltasts, at least on the Spartan side, played at Coronea. He provides more detail, believing the attack on the Argive hoplites in the center of the allied line was conducted by a combined action consisting of peltasts and hoplites, followed by the main force of hoplites commanded by Agesilaus himself⁸⁷.

It could that Xenophon simply does not provide enough evidence to make any sort of conclusion. Best's scenario assumes a great degree of coordination that has not been seen so far on a Greek battlefield. He maintains this coordination did exist, writing that Agesilaus used peltasts effectively in combination with other parts of his army in Asia Minor. Evidence is given in Agesilaus' march on Sardis in *Hellenika* with many of the same soldiers as confirmation of this combined-arms capability:

At this point Agesilaus, who knew that all of his forces were with him, whereas the enemy's infantry had not yet arrived, decided that it was the right moment to attack if he could do it. Having sacrificed, immediately led his phalanx against the enemy horse that he had deployed; he ordered hoplites from the ten-year class to close with the enemy, and the peltasts to lead the way on the run. He also gave the order for the cavalry to attack as he was following with the entire army.⁸⁸

This action on the road to Sardis sounds similar to Herippidas's men running out in front of the

84 J.P.G, Best. *Thracian Peltasts and Their Influence on Greek Warfare* (Netherlands, Wolters-Noordhoff Groningen, 1969), p 56

85 Ibid

86 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.3.17

87 Best, p 84-85

88 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.4.23

phalanx at Coronea. This would seem to “break” the rules of hoplite warfare, especially when it comes to maintaining cohesion of the line. If that part of the Peloponnesian League line consisted of a mercenary unit, this manner of attack becomes more plausible. Hoplites were independent farmers who could afford the armor and shield needed for close combat. Mercenaries generally could not. Being lighter armed soldiers, they did not depend on a military system that relied on mass and the collective whole. As a result, mercenaries preferred mobility over mass. The staunchly conservative militia hoplites facing these mercenaries at Coronea probably did not know what to make of this swarming rock (and projectile) throwing mass backed up other hoplites and cavalry. The Corinthians, unlike the Argives facing the Spartans, did not panic but were still forced to retreat.

Best's scenario could be true but it would seem odd to place lightly armed troops on the front of a formation charging directly for a hoplite formation, especially at the onset of a battle. If the enemy hoplites stand their ground, the peltasts would be crushed between them. Perhaps the peltasts could retreat between the files of the oncoming friendly hoplite formation although that could potentially weaken that phalanx's cohesion. It would seem wiser to place peltasts behind the hoplites and let them shower the enemy with missile weapons, thus using their weapons longer range to maximum advantage. This alignment would also aid Best's argument for effective combined-arms coordination.

Peltasts on the Spartan side are thus accounted for, but where are the peltasts who marched out to Coronea with the Thebans? The logical place, like Nemea, would be to place them on the flanks. Peltasts were of no use in shock infantry combat and there is no indication that the light infantry allied to Thebes was trained in the manner of Herippadas' mercenaries or even present on the battlefield. It is conceivable they could have been guarding the camp or were, in the case of the action at Epieikia before the battle at Nemea, scouting to find the enemy. Xenophon does not mention the Theban-allied

peltasts at the battle but they make a prominent appearance shortly afterward, harassing the Spartan army in classic peltast fashion as it withdrew northward toward Locris:

Once again, the soldiers carried off from the villages both goods and food. They did this for the whole day, but toward evening, when the Spartans in the rear were departing, the Locrians followed them, throwing missiles and javelins. The Spartans turned, pursued them, and struck some of them down. After this they no longer followed from behind but instead pelted them from higher ground.⁸⁹

Both the Opuntian and Ozolian Locrians were present on the left flank of the allied army facing the Spartans at Coronea. It would be entirely credible that these peltasts were the same men at Coronea. Since they were not hoplites, they would have been occupying the flank or even rear. Their attack after Coronea could also be a means to scouting to ascertain the location of the Spartan army nearing their homeland. This small action, which succeeded in killing the Spartan polemarch Gylis, foreshadowed an even greater triumph four years later for peltasts along the road between Sicyon and Lechaemum.

Nemea and Coronea were the last set-piece battles of the Corinthian War. A generation would pass before Greece saw another major battle like them. In both clashes, certain conclusions made themselves painfully evident to contemporary observers and future historians.

Greek battle tactics at the end of the Corinthian War remained a battle chiefly between phalanxes. The infantry phalanx could take and hold ground. Although the *othismos* remained an important part of hoplite warfare, the Spartans found their key to victory in outflanking opponents to break up an enemy phalanx. This method represented an advance in tactical thinking but it also maximized traditionally Spartan advantages in drill, organization, and discipline, combining and focusing them in breaking up an enemy phalanx with deadly efficiency.

⁸⁹ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.3.22

The Thebans had found another method of breaking an enemy formation in the use of the deep phalanx. It represented a throwback to the previous century in utilizing brute force and numbers and attacking the weaker left side of the enemy phalanx. The concentration of force on one point of an enemy formation succeeded in both battles. It was also easier for an amateur militia to use with a minimum of practice.

Spartan superiority in phalanx warfare remained unsurpassed and, most importantly, unchallenged. In both battles, the Thebans were on the right side of allied phalanxes and considered the finest in that army. However, they had deliberately avoided fighting the Spartans until Coronea, when circumstances forced them to do so. Sparta's professionalism and organization allowed them to fight any opponent confidently. Attacking the left side of an enemy formation only amplified Spartan advantages. Spartan professionalism also allowed them to develop tactics such as the flanking move, which could be used against a numerically superior opponent. It also created an overwhelming psychological advantage, creating the image of an invincible, disciplined juggernaut, destined to win through superior tactics (Nemea) or sheer force (Coronea).

The Theban deep phalanx had its advantages in sheer striking power, but its lack of mobility hampered its effectiveness. Thebes used a club while Sparta wielded a rapier. The generation-long battle for hegemony between Thebes and Sparta was turning into a contest of bulk versus agility. Nemea was a decisive victory for Sparta but Coronea was more of, as Wellington would say two millennia later at Waterloo, “a close run thing.” On that battleground, the Thebans' tightened deep phalanx scored a small success in breaking through the Spartan phalanx. The unique shape of the Boeotian shield certainly helped in the “tightening up” of a deep phalanx and increasing its striking power (Figure Four).

Sparta did not follow up on the victories. Perhaps a symptom of overconfidence, Agesilaus even disbanded the army and left a small, limited invasion of Phocis to Gylis, who died at the hands of pletasts. This overconfidence, perhaps even *hubris*, would come back to haunt Sparta. For all the attention they had paid to previous battles, Lazenby comments, “In the long term, the Spartans should have taken note, one feels, of the effect of close-packed Theban hoplites in depth.”⁹⁰ The Spartans had developed one method for defeating an enemy phalanx. Thebans had created their own. At Lechaeum, Athenian peltasts would show all of Greece still another.

90 Lazenby, p 148

Lechaeum, 390 BC

The battles of Nemea and Coronea confirmed the superiority of the Spartan heavy infantry phalanx. The phalanx remained the king of the battlefield, but the supporting arms were beginning to play a greater role in Greek battles. An analysis of the Battle of Lechaeum demonstrated the capabilities and potential greater role of peltasts. If the Spartan phalanx could not be defeated by hoplites, maybe it would meet its match fighting peltasts.

In 390 BC, the Athenians launched an ambush of Spartan hoplites near Corinth at the Corinthian Gulf port of Lechaeum. A Spartan *mora*, or regiment of six hundred hoplites, was returning from escorting fellow Spartans away from Corinth so they could return home to Amyklai for a religious festival. As they returned back to their positions, the Athenian commanders, Iphikrates and Kallias, took advantage of exposed hoplites marching in column unsupported by cavalry or other peltasts. Spartan hoplites, like their fellow Greeks, carried their shields on their left arm. Iphikrates ordered his men to attack the exposed right side of the hoplites marching along the road. The Athenian peltasts ran directly for their targets, stopped well out of the reach of hoplite spears, threw their javelins and missiles, and darted away.

The Spartan response was one of confusion, a total lack of strategy, and panic. Futile attempts by men wearing armor to run down unencumbered peltasts was followed by an unwise decision to make a stand on a hill where the attackers continued to shower stationary, exposed defenders with more missiles, mostly javelins. The end result was the deaths of two hundred and fifty Spartans⁹¹.

Lechaeum was not an isolated event nor was the victory a fluke. Three years later, Iphikrates would duplicate this feat with many of the same men under his command near the Hellespont. Peltasts

91 Xenophon provides the only ancient account of this battle. It is found in *Hellenika* 4.5.11-18

dealt the Spartans another stinging defeat at Abydos. On that occasion, they took the high ground of a canyon and hurled their weapons down at another Spartan column strung out along the length of the road⁹². These battles showed the potentials and limitations of pletasts.

The most remarkable facet of the ambush at Lechaeum is that a Spartan hoplite force was defeated by an enemy whose hoplites only played a support role. The lowly peltasts shouldered the brunt of the fighting and had scored a stunning victory. Lecheaum has often been compared to the Spartan defeat at Sphacteria in 425 BC even though the earlier engagement has been described as more of a siege. In both actions, the peltasts played the central role and in this way, Lechaeum bears its closest resemblance to Sphacteria. Although there are many similarities, the most striking tactical difference between the two battles is that Lechaeum was a combined arms operation—on both sides with varying degrees of success. To understand the peltast's growing role in Greek battles, one must understand their origins and methods.

Agesilaus' campaign in the western sector of Asia Minor came to a hasty, unsatisfying conclusion in 394 BC when Sparta called him back for the Corinthian War. It was not long before Agesilaus was marching back to Greece along the same coastal road Xerxes had used a century earlier. His first step home beyond the Hellespont put him in Thrace, the birthplace of the peltast.

The term *peltast* originated from the one piece of defensive equipment they possessed—a crescent shaped *pelta* shield. Light enough to be held in the left hand without forearm support, the *pelta* was made from animal skins stretched over a wicker framework without any metal fittings. The small *pelta* was certainly no *hoplon* shield. The peltasts had two weapons—missiles and mobility. Since they wore no armor, peltasts could throw their javelins and spears or even rocks and then run

92 Xenophon describes the battle at Abydos in *Hellenika* 4.8.34-39

away from the more heavily armed hoplites. Their greatest strength was that they were, precisely, not hoplites.

Peltasts were not restricted to level ground, ranging over almost any kind of terrain. They could quickly occupy high ground, move through rocky landscapes, and conduct reconnaissance, acting as the eyes and ears of an advancing army. These unarmored men could scurry back and forth across battlefields using missile weapons such as javelins, slings, and even bows to strike well out of range of any hoplite spears. Arrian, a Greek writing in the second century AD, observed that peltasts could “inflict wounds at long range”⁹³. Ambushes, pursuit, screening, and picking off stragglers were all peltast specialties.

The peltast fighting style that the Greeks became familiar with and ultimately adopted originated in Thrace. Thracian peltasts were first recruited by Greeks living near the Thracian border and eventually this form of warfare spread further south. Thracian peltasts had a presence in Classical Greece from at least the reign of Pisistratus (c.546 BC-527 BC). Attic pottery from this time period depict the tyrant's bodyguards with their distinct, *alopekia* caps, low, flapped boots, and the trademark crescent shields. By the Peloponnesian War, Greek peltasts were in fact Greek although Thracians remained the peltast *par excellence* well into the fourth century BC⁹⁴. Their deadly potential was first showcased for all to see at Spartan expense at Sphacteria. Peltasts made their first dramatic appearance in the fourth century at Lechaeum.

Peltasts, in stark contrast to hoplites, did not fight in a uniform mass. Peltasts tactics were based on their mobility as individuals. They ran forward in open order toward an enemy phalanx and threw their weapons before retiring back toward a friendly phalanx, sometimes between the ranks,

93 Arrian, *Tactics*, 4.4.6

94 Best, p 135

other times to the flanks. Their lack of armor ensured unrestricted mobility and peltasts never sought to come to grips with heavier enemies. The *machaira* short sword they carried for personal protection was useless in hand to hand combat against anyone but other light infantry.

Although the discussion of Greek light infantry includes slingers and archers, Xenophon reveals that the primary weapon of the Greek peltast in the fourth century BC was the javelin. For instance, Xenophon notes on Agesilaus' Persian expedition, the Bithynians used peltasts to attack exposed hoplites on an open plain, hurling missiles and javelins to deadly effect⁹⁵. Back on the Greek mainland, he also observed Locrian peltasts hurling missiles and javelins at Spartan soldiers in the aftermath of Coronea⁹⁶.

This is an interesting development considering that compared to slings and bows, javelins have the shortest range, least accuracy, and seemingly the lowest killing potential. Xenophon writes in *Anabasis* that Rhodian slingers could hurl lead bullet projectiles farther than Persian archers could shoot arrows: "...And the barbarians were no longer able to do any harm by their skirmishing at long range for the Rhodian slingers carried further with their missiles than the Persians, farther even than the Persian bowmen"⁹⁷ Thucydides expounds on the range advantage archery enjoys over javelin throwing in Demothenes' Aetolian campaign: "Nevertheless they managed to hold out so long as the archers still had arrows and were able to use them, since the light armed Aetolians fell back before the volleys."⁹⁸.

The reasons behind the adaptation of the javelin as the weapon of choice among peltasts lie both in Greek culture and ruthless practicality. The range of a javelin is limited by the strength of the human arm. The techniques of throwing a javelin in battle or in an athletic contest remains

95 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.2.3-4

96 Ibid, 4.22

97 Xenophon, *Anabasis*, 3.4.16

98 Thucydides, 3.98.1

fundamentally the same albeit a considerable difference in adrenaline levels and urgency. Both situations involve running forward, planting the one foot while trailing with the other and hurling the weapon forward over the head in an overhand motion. A thong, known as an *amentum*, was used to leverage the javelin before hurling the weapon ahead, and increase both the length and force of the throw. The peltast would put his last two fingers in loops in the *amentum* to impart a spin on the weapon in midflight to improve accuracy in much the same way rifling effects a bullet. Although the peltast's target tended to be entire formations rather than individuals, accuracy was still sought since stray shots were the same as a miss and therefore a wasted effort. Tests conducted by H.A. Harris establish the average range of an unaided javelin throw is about twenty meters (sixty feet)⁹⁹. The use of the *amentum* extends this range to about eighty meters (two hundred and forty feet). The current record, set in 1996, sits at 98.48 meters (approximately three hundred and twenty-three feet)¹⁰⁰. Although one must take into account the different construction of the javelins used, human strength and throwing mechanics have remained the same throughout history. Nonetheless, a nearly three hundred and fifty foot throw, while impressive, would not be as effective as a closer, more accurate shot.

The effective killing range of a bow can vary between fifty and two hundred yards. It is clearly a more accurate and deadlier weapon than a javelin. William McLeod, after combining a thorough examination of primary sources with field tests, writes in "Range of the Ancient Bow" that archers were quite accurate for shots of nearly sixty meters (one hundred and eighty feet) and that effective range could be extended to one hundred and sixty to one hundred and seventy-five meters (four hundred and eighty to five hundred and twenty-five feet.) He also concludes in his tests that shots reaching out as far as five hundred meters (fifteen hundred feet) were possible though not as effective¹⁰¹

99 M.A. Harris, "Greek Javelin Throwing", *Greece and Rome*, Volume 10, No.1, March 1963, pp 26-36

100 GuinnessWorldRecords.com

101 William McLeod, "Range of the Ancient Bow", *Phoenix*, Volume 19, No.1, 1965, p 8

This naturally leads to the question of why Greeks would prefer the javelin. There are several possible explanations and the answer involves all of them to some degree. The first reason lies in the failure to maximize the full potential of the bow. Greek archers pinched the bowstring between the thumb and forefinger while drawing the weapon to their chest. This weak grip did not create an impressive amount of kinetic energy nor would it allow the use of stronger bows. The result was a much shorter range than the bow was capable of and a dramatic lack of “hitting power”. Such shots also failed to penetrate armor.

Scythian mercenaries used the “Mediterranean loose”, curling three fingers around the bowstring of a more powerful composite bow. They also drew their bows all the way past the ear, which created a much more powerful shot. Scythian bows, unlike Hellenic ones, were constructed from horn and sinew whereas the Greeks never applied their impressive technological aptitude to archery. Archers in Greece were generally mercenaries from other nations or found on the fringes of the Greek world in places like Crete. These areas were also places where the bow was used since childhood. Greeks on the mainland would have to undergo extensive training to effectively use bows. It was easier to use mercenaries who arrived with those skills and were ready to use them. In that same vein, javelins were more familiar to the Greeks because the weapons were easier to use, requiring only simple instruction or demonstration of overhand throwing. Javelin throwing was also an Olympic event. Like the foreign archers who grew up with the bow and arrow, Greeks had a lifelong familiarity with the javelin.

The sling, although simple and effective, found a presence in peltast ranks. Nevertheless, slingers too were outnumbered by javelin throwers. A slinger could hurl a rock, or better yet, a smooth lead projectile (called a “bullet”) mass produced for just such a purpose. The slinger's range could be

astonishing, in some cases nearly two hundred meters (six hundred feet)¹⁰². The weapon itself was simple to construct, made of twisted gut or sinew, and even wool if necessary. The drawback was that much training was required to maximize the sling's potential. The finest slingers of the ancient world, like archers, hailed from locales where the weapon had been used since childhood. The slingers of Rhodes, Elis, and Malis found employment in wars roiling Greece because the citizen militias of the city-states were not standing armies constantly training and honing their skills needed for the inevitable outbreak of hostilities.

There were other, practical reasons the Greeks preferred the javelin. Neither arrows or sling bullets were capable of penetrating the wall of bronze shields looming on the battlefield. Javelins could not accomplish this task either but given the Greek familiarity with the weapon, a peltast could throw a javelin in an arc that came down on, or better yet, into the follow on ranks of a phalanx. Hoplites behind the first rank could not easily raise their *hoplon* shields to deflect incoming missiles. The shields were too big to raise when the phalanx closed its ranks and it is not possible to keep a twelve to fifteen pound shield elevated for long periods of time. A group of peltasts could wear down an infantry phalanx with impunity by staying out of reach. The net effect was to weaken the enemy phalanx's follow on ranks and in the view of Fraser this would dilute its *othismos*,¹⁰³ eliminating men acting as reserves. This bears an uncanny resemblance to the late Cold War NATO doctrine called "AirLand Battle." In the event of a Warsaw Pact-NATO clash in Central Europe, Western air forces would concentrate on attacking Soviet follow-forces while leaving the lead attack to ground forces. The strategy was created to weaken any Soviet ability to exploit any breakthroughs the lead attackers achieved. In the fourth century BC, if the "follow on forces" were hit with enough successful javelin

102 J.I. Lee, "Warfare in the Classical Age", 2006, in Konrad Kinzl, *A Companion to the Classical Greek World*, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing), 2006

103 A.D. Fraser, "The Myth of the Phalanx-Scrimmage", *Classical Weekly*, Volume 36, No.2, (October 1942), pp 15-16

throws, the enemy phalanx would lose strength before the dramatic clash.

Greece herself played a role in the Greek peltast's love affair with the javelin. The rocky, mountainous terrain could easily become an ally when fighting hoplite forces. Iphikrates demonstrated this to deadly effect at Abydos. The unarmored, light infantry peltast could easily climb outcroppings or canyon walls, seize the high ground, and hurl javelins down at hoplites regardless of what rank they were in. For all the commendable virtues of arrows and slings, the force of gravity gave the javelin the potential to actually pierce armor. Should the peltast not be able to retrieve his weapons or actually run out of javelins in such an environment, there were always plenty of rocks to use.

Another factor in the preference for the javelin was cultural. The Greeks' first experience with combined arms tactics came with the Persian Wars. Although the armies of Darius and Xerxes possessed a significant infantry components, the signature weapon of the Persians was the bow. Herodotus himself remarks, “The period of a [Persian] boy's education is between the ages of five and twenty, and they are taught three things only: to ride, to use the bow, and to speak the truth.”¹⁰⁴. The leviathan Persian armies found themselves on the wrong end of horrific casualty ratios at Marathon and Thermopylae. Leonidas' glorious death at the hands of Persian archers was regarded as a moral victory. Persian numbers, wicker shields, and mass arrow volleys were no match for ranks of bronze. They did not make much of an impression on the Greeks in terms of usefulness either. The Persians, after all, lost. Aeschylus lauds the victory of the “Dorian spear” in his play, “The Persians.”¹⁰⁵.

Greek cultural prejudice towards the “barbarians” also played a role. The formalized, ritualistic hoplite battlefields were clearly a Greek invention that defined warfare in its purest form—out in the open and face to face. Missile weapons, aside from their association with the Persians, were

104 Herodotus, *The Histories*, 1.136

105 Aeschylus, “The Persians”, line 817

considered cowardly, even when they played a role in victory: “Spindles [arrows] would be worth a great deal if they could pick out brave men from cowards”¹⁰⁶, one Spartan commented after the catastrophic defeat at Spahacteria.

The Spartans, judging from the unnamed hoplite's remark, heaped scorn on peltasts. Lendon argues that the Spartans' contemptuous attitude may have been justified as far as archers and slingers but in the context of classical Hellenic martial conventions, he maintains the peltasts were a natural fit in Greek military culture. He argues that peltasts, like generals, had epic legitimacy at hand. He points out that while archers have a somewhat dubious status in the Iliad and slingers barely rate a mention, the exigencies of the Peloponnesian War brought large numbers of peltasts into Greece. As a result, he concludes, peltasts fit into Greek military culture much easier than slings or archers¹⁰⁷.

Epic legitimacy or not, fighting peltasts could prove to be a maddening experience, especially to hoplite formations trained to fight in ordered ranks, inculcated in close-order drill, and taught to maintain unit cohesion at all costs. At Lechaeum, the initial Spartan response to the shower of peltasts missiles was to send the youngest, fleetest hoplites out to run down the enemy. These *ekdromoi* (“runners out”), armed at the very least with a helmet and shield and usually a bronze cuirass as well as their spear, were not going to catch many peltasts, who could move faster and had a considerable head start. The Spartans found that charging into a swarm of light infantrymen was like punching holes in water.

The *ekdromoi* would lose cohesion as they pursued peltasts as individuals, not in any kind of formation. This lack of cohesion led to individual or small groups of hoplites being swarmed over and attacked by many peltasts from multiple directions. When the “runners out” fell back, the peltasts still

106 Thucydides, 4.40.2

107 J.E. Lendon, *Soldiers and Ghosts*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press), 2005, p 97

pursued, dropping missiles, usually javelins, down on the retreating hoplites. This is what happened at Lechaem:

But when the men pursued, they could capture no one, since they were hoplites pursuing peltasts and could not come to within a spear's throw of them. When the Spartan hoplites retired from the pursuit, however, they were scattered about, since each man had individually pursued his target as swiftly as he could, and at this point Iphikrates' men would wheel around and again throw their javelins at the hoplites from in front of them, while other peltasts would run alongside the hoplites and throw javelins at their unprotected side. At the first attack the slingers quickly laid low nine or ten Spartans, and because of this they attacked much more boldly¹⁰⁸.

The Spartan hoplites attempted to run down the peltasts and failed constantly, sending out on pursuit progressively older men who ran past younger dead and wounded who had failed at the same task. They continued to repeat this strategy and somehow expected different results. The Spartans were also weakening themselves.

The unknown, and undoubtedly frustrated, Spartan commander finally called in his cavalry. The Spartans attempted another pursuit. This time, the hoplites were supported by the cavalry. The peltasts again scattered and Xenophon caustically remarks that "...the cavalry bungled the attack: for they did not pursue the enemy until they had killed some of them, but, rather, kept an even pace with the hoplites in both their attack and retreat."¹⁰⁹

The Spartan cavalry trotted alongside their hoplite comrades to support them but in doing so negated their own speed advantage. Instead of commencing a combined-arms operation, they created a larger target for the Athenian peltasts. The result was predictable: "Since this action continued in the same way, the result continued to be the same, and the Spartans were diminishing in both numbers and resolution while their enemy became bolder and their attackers more numerous."¹¹⁰

108 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 4.4.15

109 Ibid, 4.5.16

110 Ibid, 4.5.16

The Spartans no doubt may have been genuinely surprised at the outcome. Before the ambush at Lechaeum, the Spartans had defeated enemy peltasts under Iphikrates using these same tactics in Arcadia. Chiding their allies as frightened children, the Spartans handled the peltasts roughly in Arcadia before the battle at Lechaeum. Arcadian hoplites may have been afraid of peltasts but Spartan *ekdromoi* had wreaked the same sort of havoc on the Athenian light infantry they were suffering now: “But the peltasts in their turn were so frightened of the Spartans that they would not approach within a spear-cast of the hoplites, because once on a previous occasion the younger Spartans, even from that distance, had managed to capture and kill some of them.”¹¹¹ Like the Thebans at Coronea, the Athenians had learned from a previous mistake. They understood the lesson and made changes. The changes, evidently including attacking from further away, proved effective.

Sparta possessed cavalry but seemed acutely confused on how to use it on a battlefield. The quality and near invincibility of the Spartan infantry was unquestioned across Greece. Spartan cavalry had the opposite reputation, even in Sparta. As late as 371 BC at Leuctra, Xenophon remarked that “the Spartan cavalry at the time was in the very worst shape.”¹¹² When it came to operations on horseback, Sparta preferred to let her allies gallop into the fray. Cavalry was effective against peltasts and although it took some time, Olynthian cavalry, operating under Spartan command, would eventually, as Xenophon reports, prove that:

The peltasts who were serving as mercenaries to the Thebans pursued Agesilaus boldly and kept appealing to Chabrias for assistance, because his pursuit was not as zealous as theirs. But then the Olynthian cavalry (who were now serving with the Spartans in accordance with their oaths) turned around and, in their course of their pursuit of the peltasts, chased them up a hill and killed many of them, for infantry can be quickly overcome by cavalry going up a slope when the slope is easy to ascend.¹¹³

111 Ibid, 4.4.16

112 Ibid, 6.4.10

113 Ibid, 5.4.55

Light armed troops like peltasts fought as skirmishers, and required wide intervals between each man. The peltasts' actions at Lechaeum, pulling back to avoid charging hoplites and then surging forward to chase their retreating forms, were clearly coordinated. This kind of mass movement in concert would strongly imply consistent training, a trait not characteristic of citizen militias. The men needed room in this open formation to use their weapons, needed to respond appropriately to trumpet calls, had to know when to attack and advance and needed to know how to conduct attack drills without hesitation.

Such training was the direct result of exemplary leadership. Athens was blessed with just such a man. Iphikrates seemed to be the personification of Athens. The son of a shoemaker, Iphikrates rose to become a feared commander whose charisma and active mind espoused both unconventional tactics and strict discipline. It was only natural a man like him would gravitate towards peltasts. His disciplinary measures could at times be brutal. Frontinus, an aristocratic first century AD Roman author of several military treatises, explains how Iphikrates, shortly after Lechaeum, encouraged his sentries to remain vigilant:

When Iphikrates, the Athenian general, was holding Corinth with a garrison and on one occasion personally made the rounds of the sentries as the enemy were approaching, he found one of his guards asleep at his post and stabbed him with his spear. When certain ones rebuked this procedure as cruel, he answered, "I left him as I found him."¹¹⁴

Polyaenus, the second century BC Macedonian author of *Stratagems in War*, writes Iphikrates had his men drill constantly and taught them to react to signals that ordered them to fall into a formation where "each man appeared to have been posted by an expert general."¹¹⁵ This discipline made itself apparent in the conduct of the battle of Lechaeum and the peltast formation, while loose, never broke. Coordination was also evident as the pursuit remained limited and the pursuers were

¹¹⁴ Frontinus, *Strategemata*, 3.12.2

¹¹⁵ Polyaeus, *Stratagems in War*, 3.9.35

prudent to stop well out of spear range of the regrouping Spartans.

Even for men operating as loosely as peltasts, it was vital that unit integrity be maintained.

Peltasts did not seek battles of annihilation. According to Polyaeus, one main command that Iphikrates always gave his men was to operate as a unit and never let themselves get strung out on a pursuit:

When he had routed the enemy, Iphicrates never allowed his lines to be broken in the heat of the pursuit. He continually called out to his light-armed troops to beware of ambushes. He also had a general rule, never to press the enemy too hard when they had been routed, if there were any narrow passes or rivers behind them; for if they are hemmed in, they are often forced by desperation to rally and fight again. Nor did he think it a mark of good generalship, to pursue the enemy to their walls and battlements; for a sure victory has often been snatched away, when it is rashly followed up within a javelin's throw of the walls; and the victors have been forced, with disgrace and loss, to relinquish their conquests.¹¹⁶

The Spartans had their own peltasts, employing light-armed troops as scouts and skirmishers.

These specialists soldiers, called Skiritai, hailed from the northern reaches of Laconia. They were not Spartiates but *perioikoi*, which is easily determined not only from their lack of hoplite armor but in the way they were regarded by Spartan citizens, drawing the scorn light troops always seemed to suffer.

Xenophon gives up insight into these feelings in *Kyropaedia*: “Hence the Assyrians used them as the Lacedaemonians employ the Skirites, for every toil and danger, without sparing them”¹¹⁷. The Skirites were the Spartan equivalent of cannon fodder.

The Skiritai make their first appearance at First Mantinea (418 BC) where Thucydides tells us they were placed on the left flank (not the right side of honor) but “always had the privilege of occupying this position as a separate force”¹¹⁸. The existence of such soldiers suggests that the Spartans had learned from their defeat by light troops at Spahacteria seven years earlier and were experienced in both using them and having them used against themselves. Five years earlier, Derkylidas,

116 Ibid, 9.2

117 Xenophon, *Kyropaedia*, 4.2

118 Thucydides, 5.67

commanding Lacedaemonians in Asia Minor before Agesilaus, had acquired a force of two hundred cavalry and three hundred peltasts from a local allied king named Seuthes. Their Bithynian opponents also had cavalry and peltasts and used them in a combined arms manner against the Spartans. The Bithynians “...gathered together a great number of peltasts and cavalry and at dawn fell upon the hoplites, about two hundred in all”¹¹⁹. There was also the experience of Sphacteria to draw upon in formulating a method to combating peltasts.

The Spartans found the best use for peltasts in places hoplites would have trouble operating—mainly in the mountains. In the early stages of the Boeotian War (378 BC-371 BC), Spartan and Athenian employed peltasts raced to secure the mountain passes through Eleutherai that led into Boeotia and Attica to keep the others armies at arms lengths. Kleombrotos tricked the clever Chabrias by taking a road he was not expected to use and sent his peltasts ahead to secure the route: “His peltasts went ahead of the army and encountered men on guard on at the summit, about 150 in number, and the peltasts killed all of them, except for a few who may have escaped. Kleombrotos himself then descended into Plataea, a city that was still friendly to Sparta.”¹²⁰

Such mountain warfare required an almost constant presence at strategic passes. Hoplites were not suited for such use not only because of their heavy equipment and training but temperament. The heavy infantry, as historians and readers know, were civilians with interests and employment at home. They would not expect to stay out in the mountains far from home for extended periods of time, especially in times of peace or lack of combat. Mercenary peltasts who were better suited for such duty and being mercenaries probably had no home to return. This represents another advance in the direction of professionalism.

119 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 3.2.3

120 Ibid 5.4.14

Later in the Boeotian War, a Spartan polemarch named Phoibidas nearly scored a Spartan “Lechaeum” at Theban expense. Xenophon chronicles the sharp combat that took place in 378 BC showed that the Spartans, at long last, learned how to use peltasts and could do so while using other arms simultaneously. He writes that Phoibidas pressed the advancing Theban hoplites close with his peltasts but kept his heavy infantry close by to provide a tactical base much like Kallias' men at Lechaeum. The Thebans retreated under the hail of peltast javelins and missiles while Phoibadas chased them, keeping his hoplites close behind the Spartan peltasts. The attack went well until Phoibadas was killed but the Thebans still suffered a strategic “bloody nose.”¹²¹

The immediate impression is that Sparta finally learned to effectively use peltasts consistently by the Boeotian War. Conversely, the Athenians had first experienced dealing with peltasts in Aracania in 426 BC under the legendary Demosthenes¹²² and were able to turn what they learned in blood and treasure the following year against Sparta at Sphacteria.

Realistically, a look at the historical record shows that Sparta had peltasts of her own and had experience in light infantry operations, at Mantinea, in Asia Minor, and possibly Nemea and Coronea. As in the case of the flanking attacks, Sparta was capable of adaptation and innovation. This would, at first glance, make the discomfited Spartan reaction to the peltasts' attack at Lechaeum even more confusing. The most obvious explanation is that the Spartans simply had no peltasts in the area to combat Iphikrates's men. The enterprising Athenian general saw an opportunity and seized it. Or that Sparta decided to incorporate peltasts into her army after Lechaeum.

Near constant warfare gave rise to a class of experienced generals. Greek generals were originally elected magistrates who led armies as one civic duty among many. By the fourth century

121 Ibid, 5.4.42-43

122 Thucydides, 3.112

elected generals would spend more and more time away from the *polis*. As a result, they accumulated a store of military knowledge. The gifted amateur of the fifth century was now becoming a professional. War was still an art but professionalism edged it in the direction of science. This created the kind of specialization in leadership that mercenaries had in military skills. H.R. Hall writes that men like Iphikrates, Chabrias, and even Agesilaus were different from their predecessors occupying the same post:

These Greek military specialists remind us, not so much of medieval condottieri, with whom they have been compared, as of the German and other professional generals of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, men like Montecuculi, the von Schulemberg who commanded the Venetians at Corfu, Marshal Schomberg, the famous Marechal de Saxe.¹²³

Iphikrates was the personification of this new kind of general. His strict disciplinary measures and ingenious stratagems were hallmarks of something not seen in Greece outside of Sparta. The mercenaries he led constituted for, all practical purposes, a standing army. Instead of disbanding after a battle or campaigning, Iphikrates' mercenaries remained a unit throughout the Corinthian and the Hellespont campaigns for nearly four years (393 BC-389 BC). Keeping such a diverse group of men together, motivated, and focused required leadership that reflected these same traits. Citizen militias and *ad hoc* armies did not operate in this manner. Pickard-Cambridge writes that the generals of this time period were not as attached to their *polis* as generals of the past had been¹²⁴. Their loyalty was not an issue. The change, Pickard-Cambridge maintains, was that generals of the fourth century BC were concerned almost exclusively with military matters, leaving the civil aspect of the position to others. They did not return to the city that often, remaining out in the field on campaign and identifying more with his troops than the city that paid him or those soldiers he led. These soldiers rarely walked on the streets of the city whose emblem was painted on their shields. Men such as

¹²³ H.R. Hall, *Cambridge Ancient History*, Volume 6, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press), 1933, p 151

¹²⁴ Pickard-Cambridge, *Demosthenes*, (London, UK: G.P. Putman and Sons), 1914, p 99

Iphikrates, Chabrias, and Chares possessed a store of knowledge that had no use to a state at peace so it was not surprising to have other city-states bid for their services. The generals may not have ever led a revolt against their city, but their outlook was becoming as mercenary as the actual mercenaries under their command.

Peltasts, unlike hoplites, were highly skilled soldiers who were part of the new mercenary forces. The conclusion of the Peloponnesian War saw a dramatic increase in the number of Greek mercenaries. Political exiles and adventurers, like Xenophon for instance, were always among their number. Most were ordinary soldiers looking for pay and booty. The huge numbers of mercenaries after 404 BC gives a historian reason for pause, especially considering that citizen hoplites were the mainstay of Greek armies. The answer lies in the social and economic conditions immediately after Athens' surrender.

The extraordinarily long Peloponnesian War (431 BC- 404 BC) disrupted long held traditions and even the rhythm of life, particularly in Athens. Farmers returning to their land must have been distraught at what they had found. Ravaging the land was a standard occurrence in the war and in its aftermath lay ruined farms and destroyed homes. Plagues and a generation long war destroyed entire families. Some did succeed in resurrecting the family farm but many could not. Although the thought of parting with land held by the family for years, along with the religious and ancestral obligations, bordered on heresy, the prospect of destitution was worse. John V. A. Fine explains that buying, selling, and mortgaging land were becoming common practices, especially in Athens. In Fine's view, it seemed reasonable that the uprooting of peasants in the war, elimination of whole families from plague and war, long periods of separation from land and home, constant plundering of the enemy and the acquisition of cynical attitudes in the struggle to survive may have weakened many attachments to the

traditional concept of the sacred obligation to preserve family land. In the aftermath of the Peloponnesian War, the idea that land was just another commodity began to emerge¹²⁵.

Conditions such as these were not restricted to Athens. This story played itself out over and over throughout Greece. Many of the dispossessed people possessed military training and experience. There were enough of them for any number of wars and conflicts in Greece and even abroad. Cyrus had little trouble finding Greek mercenaries to use in his attempt to usurp the throne of Persia from Artaxerxes II. Using mercenaries for such an undertaking was not surprising. It was the sheer size of the Ten Thousand as an army that was unprecedented. Those who returned to Greece had even more experience to draw upon.

Military tactics, especially with peltasts, were more complicated than traditional phalanx warfare. The phalanx required little training, moved as a mass, and, outside of Sparta, did not undertake complicated maneuvers. It was cheaper to hire men who already possessed the skills than to train someone from the beginning. Therefore, Rhodian slingers, and Cretan and Scythian archers were in every city-state's army. Arcadians and Aetolians made a name for themselves as exemplary hoplite mercenaries. Iphikrates' peltasts at Lechaeum were mercenaries raised in the Hellespont by Conon with the help of Pharnabazus during another one of Persia's bouts with instability in the early fourth century. John Fine also notes, that at least in Athens, citizen patriotism had its limits in a time of constant war:

It is also probable that some Athenians were acquiring a rather skeptical attitude about the never ending wars. If they felt Athens was in danger, then the old patriotism blazed out, but for many of the wars in which the leaders embroiled the state, and in which the people had little interest, a common sentiment was to leave the fighting and dying to the mercenaries.¹²⁶

Although mercenaries were not motivated by the same patriotism that drove citizen phalanx

¹²⁵ John V.A. Fine, *The Ancient Greeks—A Critical History* (Cambridge, MA:Harvard University Press), 1983, pp 529-530

¹²⁶ Ibid, p 532

militias into battle, they developed their own *esprit de corps*. This was necessary to keep a unit together so that training would be remembered and a form of institutional memory be created. This made training and organization much easier. Dedicated, permanent leadership, with a hint of dynamism, tied it all together. H.W. Parke notes “The *esprit de corps* and its accompanying discipline were the greatest contribution made to fourth century warfare by the mercenary soldier.”¹²⁷

Tactically, mercenaries opened new possibilities for the development of war in the Greek world. Their actions, and sometimes existence, broke the old ritualistic rules. Since they were not armored, they preferred mobility over mass. They could operate in broken terrain with ease. Since mercenaries operating together came from different places, a different form of leadership was needed. The role of the general was another aspect of warfare that would change.

Generals now needed more than personal bravery and physical courage. Generals were no longer in the front rank of a battle lasting less than an hour, unable to do more than lead by example. They now embarked on campaigns that required more practical knowledge in organizational skill and effective use of terrain, especially as Greek battlefield tactics included an increasing use of combined-arms methods that involved the coordination of peltasts, cavalry, and hoplites and a more strategic, long term outlook that went beyond the immediate battlefield. Xenophon expounds on this in *Recollections of Socrates*. A general, according to Socrates, must not only know tactics, but furnish equipment needed to wage war and manage the supply situation. A general, the philosopher veteran of Delium continues, must have the values of cunning, kindness, cruelty, candor, deviousness and other qualities. Socrates concludes that the general must also know how to choose between good men and bad men and how to use formations as well as draw them up¹²⁸.

127 H.W. Parke, *Greek Mercenary Soldiers: From the Earliest Times to the Battle of Ipsus* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press), 1933, p 54

128 Socrates, *Recollections III*, 1-4

Parke writes that the reference to mercenaries as *epikouroi* (“helpers”) by their employer city-state politely implied they were outsiders and not entirely trusted. The more derogatory term *misthophoros* (“paytaker”) rounded out the characterization¹²⁹. Skillful commanders would see this as a chance to create bonds between the men, again aiding in the creation of unit pride. Mercenary armies began to resemble standing armies but with little or no attachment to the city-state that employed them. This line of thought found its way to the commanding generals as well. Matthew Trundle points out that mercenary infantry were entirely dependent on their employers for their pay and often for communal booty distribution¹³⁰. In spite of the appalling way commanders handled payment, shoddily provisioned their men and withheld pay for months, mutinies were relatively rare. Trundle also writes that commanders encouraged their men to spend money when they had it and denied them opportunities to spend when they did not. Still, the poverty-stricken mercenaries remained loyal to their commanders.

While mutinies over pay were relatively rare, there was still a danger. It was more of a threat to the *polis* than the general. The state of affairs described by Trundle created a loyalty to (or dependency on) the general leading the mercenaries. That general, with an army and the power it possessed, might begin to develop his own agenda, much like the tyrants of old¹³¹. Hall assures historians that “In any case, it is clear that Iphikrates, although with a temper naturally haughty and domineering, was controlled by the home authorities.”¹³²

Many scholars have equated Lechaeum to Spahacteria a generation earlier although the earlier battle resembled a siege. There are undoubtedly similarities in that the Spartans suffered a defeat at

129 Parke, pp 20-21

130 Matthew Trundle, *Greek Mercenaries: From the Late Archaic Period to Alexander* (New York, NY:Routledge Press), 2004, p 102

131 Ibid, p 102

132 H.R. Hall, p 152

the hands of peltasts and that the news of the Athenian triumph shocked all of Greece. Many have weighed in on the question of whether this battle and the way peltasts were used represented a fundamental change in Greek warfare. John Bagnall Bury believes that Lechaeum bore such significance, even if it was not particularly evident at the moment. He writes that the Spartan defeat at Lechaeum bore a resemblance to their earlier defeat at Sphacteria in that in both cases, Lacedaemonian hoplites were discomfited by continuous attacks by inaccessible light troops. Bury also suggests that the success of the peltasts under Iphikrates was a sign that the professional peltast would win more such victories in the future¹³³.

Parke develops Bury's view, arguing that Lechaeum was a watershed moment for peltasts and represented a change in Greek battle tactics. Parke writes that although Athenian hoplites were present at Lechaeum, he believes their role to be only passive. The peltast victory at Lechaeum over the vaunted Spartan hoplite, in Parke's words, conferred upon the light infantry a new reputation for deadliness they never had before. Parke believes this "new esteem" won at Lechaeum explains the frequent appearance of peltasts in all Greek armies, Athens in particular, during the next several decades¹³⁴.

The position of Bury and Parke ignores the contribution made to victory by the Athenian hoplites present at the battle. Best, who champions peltasts and their role in Greek warfare, does not think the Athenians hoplites were mere bystanders watching from a distance. Best writes that when the Spartans, despite the casualties suffered from the peltast attacks finally stood their ground, it was the advance of the Athenian hoplites that made them surrender their position¹³⁵.

133 John B. Bury, *A History of Greece to the Death of Alexander the Great*. (New York, NY: McMillan and Company, 1900), p 548

134 Parke, p 54

135 Best, p 89

Best also notes that the Spartans, worn down by the incessant long distance attacks by the peltasts, were not longer able to repel to a hoplite attack. After the Spartans uncharacteristically panicked and fled, the peltasts came back into the battle. Although the peltasts labored more than the hoplites at Lechaeum, Best takes issue with Parke's assertion that the light troops had obtained a new reputation for deadliness they previously lacked solely because of Lechaeum. He also disagrees with Parke's other assertion that the frequent appearance of peltasts in Greek armies is due to Iphikrates' victory at Lechaeum, contending that the sources, even in Athens, simply do not provide any support to Parke's conclusions¹³⁶

The peltast role was important but the triumph at Lechaeum would not have happened without the hoplites providing a tactical base for the light infantry. The deployment of the Athenian hoplites, while not directly engaged, did frustrate the Spartan “running out” tactics. Bury and Parke are correct in thinking that Lechaeum was a turning point in the evolution of Greek battle tactics but for the wrong reasons. Lechaeum did not show the primacy of the peltasts over the hoplite. The practice of combined arms was what was advanced. Anderson writes that the lesson of Lechaeum was not that the best peltasts could defeat the best hoplites even on level ground but that the best hoplite infantry could not fight effectively against a skillful combination of heavy and light infantry unless they themselves were adequately supported by other combat arms.¹³⁷

Iphikrates' exploits support this position. Plutarch writes that “The Athenian general Iphikrates once compared he light armed troops to the hands, the cavalry to the feet, the main body of the infantry to the chest and breast-plate, and the general to the head.”¹³⁸

The final judgment on the Battle of Lechaeum is apparent. Cavalrymen were skirmishers and

136 Ibid, p 89

137 Anderson, p 125

138 Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 2.1

not shock troops. Although peltasts could cause a lot of damage to a hoplite formation, they, alone and unaided, could not destroy it. Lechaeum proved the hoplite formation was not invincible but it would remain the cornerstone of Greek armed conflict regardless of the power and ferocity of mass peltast missile power. The hoplite and his phalanx would have to share prominence on the battlefield but it would not lose renown for another reason that became visible at Lechaeum—the hoplite phalanx could advance, hold ground, and defend it. Despite their talents for “inflicting wounds at long range”, Xenophon provides the ultimate rebuke to Bury and Parke in *Kyropaedia*: “Not even all the slingers in the world could stand at close quarters against a few men with hand to hand weapons.”¹³⁹

139 Xenophon, *Kyropaedia*, 7.4.15

Leuctra, 371 BC

On a summer day in 371 BC, armies led by Sparta and Thebes clashed on the open plain of Leuctra, in the heart of Boeotia. It had been nearly twenty-three years since the Spartans and Thebans had fought in a pitched, set-piece battle. This clash, building for nearly a generation, would feature the highly trained, professional Spartans deployed in a line formation that could be used against the flank and rear of the enemy against the mostly amateur militia of Thebes, counting on breaking through the enemy with a deep phalanx. Many lessons had been learned and adjustments made. Now they were going to be put on display, intentionally or not, for all of Greece.

The battle began away from where the main clash of arms would take place. Spartan allied peltasts, mercenaries, and cavalry attacked and herded skittish Boeotians who did not want to fight against the army Sparta had brought to Leuctra back to the Theban army they originally wanted no part of. It was the first of many mistakes that would plague Sparta on this day. Xenophon wrote that these Spartan allies succeeded only in making the “Boeotian army larger and its phalanx deeper than before.”¹⁴⁰

Xenophon's description of Coronea as “a battle unlike any in our time”¹⁴¹ might have been better saved for describing Leuctra. The Battle of Leuctra, featuring complicated maneuvers, formations moving in oblique directions, integration of cavalry and infantry, and the use of reserves and elite troops, showed how far Greek battlefield tactics and strategy had evolved from simple sixth and fifth century BC collisions of hoplites drawn up in straight lines. Miltiades and Pausanias would have hardly recognized what was happening in front of them.

140 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 6.4.9

141 *Ibid*, 4.3.16

The day began at Leuctra when the Spartans, leading an army of 11,000¹⁴², took up their customary position on the right, leaving their allies on the left, while Epaminondas defied conventional wisdom and placed his Thebans on his left directly across from the unsuspecting Lacedaemonians. His fifty shield deep column was reinforced and supported by a special elite formation under the command of Pelopidas called the Sacred Band. The Spartans were initially unaware of this arrangement because the cavalry of both city-states was directly between the two armies instead of their usual place on the wings. Another thing the Spartans did not see at first was the echelon formation Epaminondas had arranged for the allies and the rest of the 7,500 soldiers marching with the Thebans.

No battle in Greek history may have ever started with two commanders under such particular pressures. Half of Epaminondas' fellow generals wanted to retreat to Thebes and stave off the Spartans in a siege. Epaminondas correctly saw that course of action would only result in the loss of support from all Boeotia, who would be subject to the same kind of destructive Spartan raids on their farmland and near starvation they suffered throughout the 370s. Epaminondas also was busy explaining away several omens or turning their apparent meanings to Theban advantage to assuage his nervous countrymen. On the other side of the field, Kleombrotos was hearing not so subtle whispers that many thought he was a Theban sympathizer who would not launch the attack. Xenophon mentions that the Spartan king was also drinking wine shortly before the battle began so that must have affected his decision making process.

The battle began in a way no other in Greece had started before—with a cavalry clash taking place between the phalanxes. The exceptional Theban cavalry did not merely disperse the Spartan horse soldiers. They hurled them back into the ranks of Kleombrotos' phalanx. The resulting confusion

142 The Spartan-*led* army commanded by Kleombrotos numbered 11,000 but the operative term is “led.” The Spartan core of the army was made up of 2300 Lacedaemonians and of them, 700 Spartiates.

disrupted the flanking movements the Spartan army was planning while the huge fifty man deep Theban column, led by the Sacred Band, smashed into the Lacedaemonians from the left side with the apparent objective of destroying the Spartan command group¹⁴³. The Spartans, arranged twelve deep, briefly held the Theban attack in place. Meanwhile the Spartan allies stood aloof, watching the battle unfold. So did the allies of Thebes, deployed in a refused flank trailing away from the Peloponnesians, ensuring the battle of Leuctra would be between only Thebes and Sparta,

“Grant me one step and we will have the victory!” Epaminondas is reported to have shouted, lending more inspiration to his Thebans, who gave a supreme effort into one more *othismos*.

Klemobrotos became the first Spartan king since the valiant Leonidas to die in battle, the Spartans lost hope, and the center of their army collapsed. Sparta was able to recover a shred of dignity with an orderly withdrawal back to camp with the body of their king. The herald the Spartans sent the next day to ask permission to recover their fallen comrades was an admission of defeat. There is little doubt that Epaminondas made certain he passed the trophy erected over the battlefield etched with the epigram “The Thebans are mightier in war”.

Prichett states, “Ironically, there are more reconstructions of Leuktra than of any other Greek battle, and the end is not in sight.”¹⁴⁴ One reason for the intense interest may be that Leuctra is an example of the increasing sophistication of Greek battle tactics and their incorporation of other branches of the armed forces alongside the hoplites. Another reason was not readily apparent to the men in the field that day. Leuctra represented the end of Sparta's reign as hegemon of Greece.

Peltasts and cavalry had great difficulty attracting the attention of ancient writers in the great

143 The Spartan Royal Guard was known as the *Hippeis*, a name that translated as “horsemen”. The unit began long before Leuctra as a cavalry unit but by 371 BC, it was arrayed in a more familiar hoplite configuration. Considering the wretchedness of the Spartan cavalry and role it played in fouling the Spartan ranks, the irony is palpable.

144 W. Kendrick Prichett, *The Greek State at War IV*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1985), p 54

battles of the fourth century BC unless they audaciously seized the center of the stage. Lechaeum was one such example. At Leuctra, the light infantry and cavalry were prominent enough in the battle's opening stages to not only warrant mention but influence the course of the battle. The Phocian peltasts and cavalymen from Herakleia and Pheious who drove “baggage carriers and those who did not want to fight”¹⁴⁵ back to Epaminondas, and made his army larger, were operating over the immediate horizon. This is a major departure from their usual position on the flanks or in the rear. This is an example of not just light forces performing their scouting duties but evidence of tactical integration. It is a difficult question to explore because, as in the case of Nemea and Coronea, they vanish from the accounts when the battle begins. In all likelihood, the peltasts remained on the flanks or retreated to the rear. The question and debate about tactical integration tends to center more around the operations of the Theban and Spartan cavalry between the phalanxes.

Xenophon's version of the battle of Leuctra begins with the Spartans and Thebans stationing their cavalry in front of the army. At first it seems the Thebans are attempting to use their cavalry as a screen to hide their unusual deployments. A closer look at Xenophon's description reveals it was the Thebans reacting to the Spartan cavalry: “Then, since the two armies faced each other in a plain, the Spartans stationed their cavalry in front of their phalanx, and the Thebans placed their cavalry opposite them.”¹⁴⁶

Greek cavalry lacked stirrups and saddles, therefore ruling out any possibilities of being used as a shock formation. The Spartans all but despised their own cavalry, relegating it to men who were in “terrible physical shape and utterly uninterested in winning glory.”¹⁴⁷ It was extremely unlikely, and in all probability, suicidal, that the Spartans would place their substandard cavalry in front of their

¹⁴⁵ Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 6.4.9

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 6.4.10

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 6.4.10

phalanx with the intention of leading an attack against clearly superior Theban mounted forces “thoroughly practiced because of the wars against the Orchomenians and Thespians.”¹⁴⁸

Kleombrotos clearly felt his cavalry could best contribute to the cause of Spartan victory by blocking prying Theban eyes with their horses and raising a miniature dust storm. Having done that, the cavalymen of Laconia had exhausted their capabilities. Screening seems to be the only possible explanation for the position of the Spartan cavalry at Leuctra.

Most scholars believe this is the case though Hans Delbruck is a notable exception. He seizes on Xenophon's “level plain” explanation and attempts to use it in suggesting that Epaminondas set his army's left flank on a “natural obstacle” with cavalry filling in the gap. He also states that the Spartans, in a move straight out of the fifth century BC, set their right flank on this terrain feature and sent their cavalry forward to open a gap between the Theban cavalry and infantry. He has, for some reason, forgotten Xenophon's observation that “the Spartan cavalry at the time was in the very worst shape.” No such terrain can be found on the battle site today so Delbruck can be dismissed on this point since such an obstacle is only found in Xenophon's *Hellenika* by “turning his meaning inside out.”¹⁴⁹

The overwhelming scholarly consensus is that Kleombrotos ordered his horses forward to take up positions in front of his army to screen his movements and conceal Spartan maneuvers. The question now is what sort of maneuver were the Spartans planning? The most plausible, easiest, and successful, movement to date would have been the flanking maneuver used at Nemea and Coronea. Anderson writes that Kleombrotos planned to march in column to the right and when he was clear of the Thebans, wheel left and form up at right angles to the original front.¹⁵⁰ Such a maneuver would be easiest to hide with a cavalry screen. Kleombrotos did not want the Thebans to see what he was doing,

148 Ibid, 6.4.9

149 Anderson, p 214

150 Ibid, p 216

therefore explaining the Spartan cavalry's forward position rather than its usual post on the flank.

The use of cavalry in this manner at Leuctra has often been regarded as the beginning of integrated infantry-cavalry tactics in Greek battle tactics. Even the bungling Spartan cavalry is at least seen as an attempt in this direction. The Theban cavalry charge is definitely more successful.

Infantry-cavalry cooperation was not a novel concept making its debut at Leuctra for there were other instances of coordination between horseman and foot soldiers in Greek history. The best example is the role of the Theban cavalry at Delium in 424 BC when Pagondas ordered his cavalry reserve to ride out from behind a hill to support his weakened left wing. Hanson cites Agesilaus' experience at the Paktolas river in Asia Minor as another example, an instance where the cavalry led the attack as the Spartan king led his army directly behind them.¹⁵¹

Although most scholars are in agreement that the Spartan cavalry was serving as a screen for infantry movements, the consensus breaks down when the question of what sort of movement the Spartan hoplites were embarking upon. As we have mentioned, the easiest maneuver would have been a Nemea-style flanking attack. Hamilton disagrees, envisioning Kleombrotos wheeling part of his line around the Theban deep phalanx, in order to encircle the Thebans with his own left flank.. Thus, he writes, units from the left of the Spartan portion of the line were being moved to the rear in preparation for a flanking movement¹⁵². This does not resemble the Spartan battle plan for Nemea but rather it bears more of a resemblance to Agis' movement at Mantinea. This might provide a better explanation for why Kleombrotos was using the Spartan cavalry as a screen. He did not want the Thebans to see the gap opening up in his lines. A flanking movement conducted in the manner of Nemea would not have entailed that kind of risk to the integrity of the Spartan line. Furthermore, this gap would give the

151 Victor Davis Hanson, "Epaminodas, Leuctra, and the 'Revolution' in Greek Tactics", *Classical Antiquity*, Volume 7, No. 2 (October 1988): 190-207

152 Hamilton, p 210

Spartan cavalry a way to exit the battle and avoid the collision between the phalanxes. On the other hand, would the Spartans have enough time for this more complicated move with an inexperienced Kleombrotos at the helm? Furthermore, were the Peloponnesian allies, not enthralled with Spartan leadership to begin with, competent enough to slide their entire army sideways into gap? A Mantinea style assault plan seems to have too many risks and potential pitfalls.

Xenophon provides a narrative of the battle and a litany of excuses for Sparta's defeat but no insight into Spartan battle strategy for Leuctra. Scholars turn to other ancient sources to answer such questions. Lazenby uses Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas* to address Spartan actions on that summer day.

According to Lazenby's interpretation, the Spartans began to change their formation when they realized the Thebans, not Boeotian allies, were on the allied left, moving forward in a deep phalanx. He writes the Spartans began changing their formation and started to fold back (or “unroll”) their right and lead it around as to wheel (or encircle) and envelop Epaminondas in strength¹⁵³. He attempts to buttress his stance by plunging deeper into the meaning of certain Greek phrases that translate into “to fold back” and “to unroll” but he simply seems to muddle his argument in doing this. His point is that if the Spartans had merely turned right and marched out in column, then it hardly conveys the notion of “folding back” that is present in Plutarch's account of Leuctra.¹⁵⁴ Lazenby concludes by flatly declaring “A more plausible hypothesis, perhaps, is that Kleombrotos tried to do what Agis attempted at Mantinea, namely, transfer men from the left of the Spartan wing of his army to its right, as to outflank the Thebans.”¹⁵⁵

The major weakness in this hypothesis is that he states the Spartans began changing formations when they realized there were Thebans facing them in a deep column. How were they able to divine

153 Lazenby, p 150

154 Ibid, p 150

155 Ibid 150

this, trying to see through not one but two cavalry forces, especially when one was in the process of being thrown back into them? Secondly, the time element comes back into play again. Would the Spartans have time to stop one mass movement and begin another with an enemy force bearing down on them? Would it be wise to even attempt such a course of action under these circumstances?

John Buckler echoes Lazenby's argument but makes the same mistake. He writes that to counter the oncoming Theban deep phalanx, Kleombrotos ordered his men to extend the line to the point where it stretched beyond the Theban left and could encircle it. This would be brought about when units from the Spartan part of the army faced about, stepped clear of the line, faced left and immediately fell into line. This way, Buckler continues, the moving hoplites were protected by those still in the main formation. There was still a danger in that this movement, again, opened a gap on Kleombrotos' left that the Peloponnesian allies were entrusted to close.¹⁵⁶

The Nemea vs Mantinea flanking debate comes back to the gap in Kleombrotos' line and why it was there. Lazenby and Buckler feel it is the natural result of the Mantinea-style maneuver and was to provide an escape route for the cavalry. A Nemea-style maneuver was more likely due to the relative ease of the movement, especially considering the inexperience of the commander and unreliability of the allies. Furthermore, such a gap between city-state contingents threatened the cohesion of the entire army, repeating the mistakes the Theban alliance made in earlier battles. As for the Spartan cavalry, had they not been heaved back into the ranks of their fellow Lacedaemonians, they could have quickly galloped down lanes opened by the hoplites for just that purpose.

The leftward movement of the deep phalanx is an interesting, and especially to the Spartans, unexpected, progression. Moving left seems totally incompatible with the rightward drift that seems so

¹⁵⁶ John Buckler, *The Theban Hegemony, 371 BC-362 BC*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), p 63

intrinsic in hoplite formations. It would also represent another advance in the professionalization of Greek soldiers. The deep Theban column at Nemea and Coronea had virtually no maneuverability since it was made up of a citizen militia with little training. The deep phalanx at Leuctra could not have spontaneously developed the coordination to perform such a battlefield move in the twenty days between the failed peace conference of 371 BC at Sparta and the Battle of Leuctra. The Theban army was clearly practicing such maneuvers for an extended period of time before the peace conference degenerated into a shouting match between Agesilaus and Epaminondas. Using practical experience as a guide, anyone with experience in military parade-ground drill knows that without practice, recognition of commands, and line to guide movement, even a normal advance of a large unit still requires reinforcement through even more practice.¹⁵⁷

Xenophon reports in *Hellenika* that the Thebans were arrayed in a column no less than fifty shields deep. The Thebans were again using the deep phalanx that was employed at Nemea and Coronea with varying degrees of success. On two previous occasions, the Thebans were on the right, facing inferior troops allied to Sparta in the most phlegmatic fashion possible. At Nemea, the Thebans had been outflanked and at Coronea, they had fought their way through the Spartan phalanx in a jarring collision.

In this battle, Epaminondas placed the deep Theban phalanx on the left flank directly across from the Spartans themselves. Xenophon's remark, "The Thebans, however, were arrayed not less than fifty shields deep, for they thought if they defeated the bodyguard of the Spartan king, the rest of the army would be easy to handle."¹⁵⁸, confirms both the deep column and its position on the Theban left since it is across from the Spartans, who are always on the right. While it is difficult to determine if the

157 George Cawkwell, "Epaminondas and Thebes", *Classical Antiquity*, Volume 22, No.2 (Nov. 1972): 254-268

158 Xenophon, *Hellenika*, 6.4.12

Thebans are targeting Kleombrotos himself or the entire Spartan component of the army, the passage grants insight into the overall goal of the Theban plan—decapitation.

Plutarch writes in his *Life of Pelopidas* that Epaminondas kept edging his phalanx to the left in an oblique fashion with the objective of pulling the Spartans away from the rest of the army.¹⁵⁹ It would appear that Epaminondas had studied the Spartans' flanking movements, sought to let them thin their phalanx, and allow the Spartans isolate themselves. Then he could bring down the full force of the Theban deep column on the isolated Spartans while minimizing the danger of outflanking that the deep phalanx was vulnerable too. Epaminondas was going to establish a local superiority in numbers while concentrating his strength on one point. This was definitely not the usual collision along the entire line that defined *tactiki* in previous battles.

Plutarch, like Lazenby and Buckler, seems to imply that the Spartans were attempting to change formations when they became aware that the Thebans and their deep phalanx were on the left instead of the Boeotian allies: “The enemy [Spartans] perceived his intention and began to change their formation, extending their right wing and starting an encircling movement as to outflank and envelop Epaminondas.”¹⁶⁰ The Theban defeat of the Spartan cavalry drove the horsemen back into the ranks of the Spartan hoplites, throwing troop movements into chaos. It was at this point that Pelopidas and his Sacred Band charged into the milling Spartans. We will discuss the role of the Sacred Band later but it is suffice to say that even soldiers from Sparta, lauded by Plutarch as “the most skilled and experienced soldiers in the world” with training that “paid special attention to the problem of changing formation without falling into disorder and confusion”¹⁶¹ would not be able to maintain cohesion or organization fighting their way through panicking horses in the middle of their phalanx. Incidentally, this would be

159 Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 23.1

160 Ibid, 23.3

161 Ibid, 23.6

a more persuasive explanation of the “crescent” formation mentioned in Diodorus' account rather than the arrival of Archidamos, who was miles away from the battle. Pelopidas' well timed charge only made things worse for the Spartans.

The Theban deep column on its position the left side of the phalanx has been praised as the “mark of a revolutionary conception in warfare.”¹⁶². A look at the historical record, however, reveals the Theban invention and use of a deep column at Delium in 424 BC and we have discussed the Spartan participation in such a formation at Munychia. Thucydides mentions the Syracusan use of a sixteen shield phalanx against the Athenians in 415 BC¹⁶³, far from Boeotia and long before Epaminondas arrived on the scene. There is also plenty of precedent for the positioning of the best troops on the left flank, with the goal of course to arrange decisive collisions. Hanson cites the well known example of pre-battle moves at Plataea and a lesser known clash between Athens and Corinth at Solygeia in 425 BC¹⁶⁴. Most interestingly, he reveals a Spartan use of this “backwards” formation by Teleutias at Olynthus eleven years before Leuctra. Whereas Cawkwell attributes the tactics of Leuctra solely to Epaminondas, Hanson writes that these strategies that Epaminondas tied together on one battlefield, had been in the process of evolution for centuries throughout the Greek world. Hanson's position is closer to the truth.

In the fourth century BC, the Greeks still built their armies around hoplites but the infantry itself had evolved. There was a new emphasis on mobility and as a consequence, the arrival of more mobile and agile infantry led to the development of new tactics. The Spartans had perfected the indirect approach of attack on the flanks and the Thebans were responding with bulk, speed, and an oblique approach that surprised even their own allies. Direct frontal attacks would still occur but they were not

162 Cawkwell, p 261

163 Thucydides, 6.67

164 Hanson, p 207

happening along the entire length of the line. The full force of the attack would be concentrated on one vital area, a task perfectly suited for a narrow fronted deep phalanx.

Epaminondas' plan at Leuctra was bold and simple. In previous battles, the best soldiers on the right wings rarely met, if at all. This time, Epaminondas was strengthening his left and placing his best troops there specifically for defeating the vaunted Spartans. The reasoning was both psychological and practical. The Thebans' allies were not enthusiastic about fighting this battle. Many were actually trying to leave when they were forced back by long ranging Spartan-allied peltasts and cavalry. Placing the allies on the left would have meant they would have to fight the Spartans' hoplite phalanx and they were clearly not up to the task. The only task facing the Boeotian right was to hold off a Peloponnesian left flank made up of soldiers who had more in common with them than their supposed Spartan allies. Sparta constantly left her Peloponnesian allies to face the enemy's best troops alone. Epaminondas was doing all he could to make sure such a fate did not befall his allies. This is where the famous "refused flank" makes its appearance in Greece.

Of the four ancient sources that discuss Leuctra, only Diodorus expressly mentions the Theban allied refused flank: "The weakest he [Epaminondas] posted on the other [right] wing, with instructions to refuse battle and retreat slowly as the enemy attack developed."¹⁶⁵ Pausanias writes that the allied contingents actually did come into combat though it seemed very much a mockery of that exercise: "When they began the battle, the allies of the Lacedaemonians, who before this time had not been especially friendly, now gave a vivid example of their hostility, since they were not willing to stand their ground and gave in whenever the enemy attacked them."¹⁶⁶ Plutarch does not mention the Theban allies at all though his statement, "During the battle, Epaminondas kept edging his phalanx to

165 Diodorus, 15.55.2

166 Pausanias, *Description of Greece*, 9.13.9

the left as to form an oblique angle to the front.”¹⁶⁷, could be interpreted to mean the entire Theban army, allies included, were moving in this direction. Xenophon, the only contemporary source, does not mention any oblique movements.

Naturally, this leads to the question of whether the refused flank even existed. If so, what was its purpose? The answer is linked to the oblique advance of the deep phalanx. The oblique phalanx and the refused flank were tools crafted for the definitive purpose of defeating the Spartan army in battle by countering and disabling the flanking movement that had become the Sparta's military *modus operandi*. They operated in concert.

The phalanx's reason for being is obvious—to fight the Spartan component of the enemy army. The refused flank was an innovation created for keeping the unreliable Boeotian allies out of the way unless needed. Most scholars of the battle, ancient and modern, agree with this perspective.

Plutarch believed Epaminondas moved his entire army in a leftward march while Diodorus indicated the oblique phalanx allowed the Theban left to come into contact with the enemy, while the suspect right stayed out of the enemy's spear range.¹⁶⁸ A reading of Plutarch's *Life of Pelopidas* reveals no mention of combat between anyone but Thebans and Spartans. Cawkwell writes there is no evidence of any kind that indicates the Boeotian and Peloponnesian allies did anything other than march out to the battlefield.¹⁶⁹

Hanson takes the opposite approach. The Theban phalanx's leftward march may have happened for the most pedestrian of reasons. He believes the course Epaminondas' army took was so obvious that it escapes notice at first and Xenophon saw no reason to give it any special notice in his account of Leuctra because there was no where else for the Thebans to go if they intended to fight the Spartans

¹⁶⁷ Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 23.1

¹⁶⁸ Plutarch, *Pelopidas* 23, and Diodorus 15.55

¹⁶⁹ Cawkwell, pp 261-262

arrayed across from them.¹⁷⁰ If the Thebans were intent on marching straight ahead from their starting position, drifting to the right as hoplite phalanx's tended, they would have insured that Kleombrotos's longer line would hit them in the flank and even rear. This line of thought argues that absence of a leftward march would have turned Leuctra into a repeat of Nemea.

Hanson makes an elementary error in his reasoning that the Theban leftward march at Leuctra was unremarkable. He, for some unexplained reason, forgets that the leftward march goes against the grain of the hoplite phalanx's basic operation as well as human nature. Such a movement could only be accomplished with training because the very nature of training is to prepares one's mind and body to do something, without hesitation, that it does not do naturally.

One can see the continuing theme of cutting the Spartans off from their supposed allies. It can also be seen why the “refused flank” is sometimes used as proof that the concept of reserves had found its way into the Greek military mind. By holding the right wing back, not only was Epaminondas keeping them away from the enemy but holding them so that they could lend their weight and numbers in the event his Thebans did not break through the Spartan phalanx. If nothing else, Buckler concludes, the presence of the Boeotian allies kept the Peloponnesians from attacking the right side of Epaminondas' column in the unlikely event they were inclined to do so.¹⁷¹

Buckler may be giving the Theban allies too much credit. They may have been given orders to charge in behind Epaminondas and Pelopidas but there is no guarantee they would have. Epaminondas' phalanx was moving leftward in an oblique fashion and had been training for some time to do this. The Boeotian allies were being held back because of their low morale and lack of training. A citizen militia whose members had tried to leave earlier could not be counted on to move quickly and decisively to the

¹⁷⁰ Hanson, p 205

¹⁷¹ John Buckler, *Central Greece and the Politics of Power in the Fourth Century BC* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), p 125

point of attack. Diodorus contributes more to the lore of the refused flank by writing that Epaminondas had ordered it to engage in a slow backward march¹⁷². Not only were they not capable of any mass movement more complicated than moving in a straight line, their previous actions made it unwise to suggest even one step backward: “If they had begun to retreat, they soon would have been running in earnest”¹⁷³. A feigned retreat was unnecessary since unenthusiastic Boeotian allies faced equally unenthusiastic Spartan allies. Both sides were prudently attempting to remove their undependable allies from the equation of battle, thus reducing it to a fight between only Thebans and Spartans. Additionally, by sparing Sparta's allies the horrors of battle, the Thebans were creating future friends and partners.

By reversing his army's line up, Epaminondas and Thebes were shouldering the heaviest, and presumably worst, part of the fighting. Like Agesilaus at Coronea, Epaminondas sought a decisive victory over the Spartans to throw them out of Boeotia and perhaps end the war in one afternoon. This time, the Spartans would not be able to use their strength in drill and training against the weakest part of the enemy's army. He was seeking to rob the Spartans of their mobility by allowing them to move into a position where they would basically outmaneuver themselves and thin out their own phalanx. Then Epaminondas could isolate the Spartans from the Greeks, pin them in place, and use the Sacred Band to charge after Kleombrotos. Polyaeus relates the story of the Theban general catching a snake, using it to represent the Peloponnesian army, and crushing its head, representing the Spartans, to explain the Theban battle plan: “If you crush the head, you will see how impotent the rest of the body is. So let us crush the head of the confederacy, that is the Laconians, and the power of their allies will become insignificant.”¹⁷⁴

172 Diodorus, 15.53

173 Anderson, p 205

174 Polyaeus, *Stratagems*, 2.3.15

Epaminondas wanted to create a situation where the battle between Thebans and Spartans would be decided not only in a clash of elite troops but where his deep phalanx would create a local superiority of numbers concentrating most of his force down on one point—like Tegyra. A victory on the left wing would not only annihilate the Spartan elite, but, the farsighted Epaminondas realized, would, once again, save the supposed “enemy” Peloponnesian contingent. Once the Spartans were crushed, the Peloponnesians would see no reason to continue fighting for a cause that was never really theirs¹⁷⁵

Those elite troops under Epaminondas' command were called the Sacred Band. With Pelopidas' men making an appearance and playing a central role, the concept of standing armies and professionalization came to the fore. This represented a further departure from the former ideal of the citizen hoplite militia, which seemed to be in the process of slowly disappearing.

Well into the fourth century BC, only Sparta, with her Lycurgan constitution, possessed an organized state wide system of military training for the citizenry. Elite groups of full time soldiers existed in other Greek city-states before Gorgidas established the Sacred Band in 378 BC. These formations of elite troops, called *epilektoi*, trained full time in military arts at the expense of the public treasury while the summer soldiers went back to their farms. Thucydides wrote of a thousand picked troops from Argos at the Battle of Mantinea in 418 BC, “who had been given by the State a long course of military training at public expense”¹⁷⁶. The Syracusan picked troops who followed Diomilus into battle against the Athenians near the Great Harbor three years later provide another example.

The origin of the Sacred Band is usually placed at 378 BC with the Theban liberation of their Kadmeia from Spartan occupiers though Diodorus places the Band at Delium¹⁷⁷. Plutarch's description

¹⁷⁵ Victor Davis Hanson, *The Soul of Battle*, (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1999), pp 47-48

¹⁷⁶ Thucydides, 5.67

¹⁷⁷ Diodorus, 12.70

of the Sacred Band is remarkably similar to the Argive and Syracusan picked troops from the Peloponnesian War: “It consisted of three hundred picked men, who were given their training and lodging by the city and were quartered on the Kadmeia”¹⁷⁸. The Sacred Band, and units like it, were not citizen militias that disbanded and went back to civilian life when danger had passed. These elite troops trained, lived together, and bonded in a warrior brotherhood that resulted in an *esprit de corps* that did not exist in civilian levies. The Sacred Band's unit pride went a step further. Its three hundred men were also homosexuals. The rationale, according to Plutarch, was, “Tribesmen or clansmen do not feel any great concern for their kinsfolk in time of danger, but a band which is united by the ties of love and beloved are ashamed to be disgraced in the presence of the other, and each stands his ground at a moment of danger to protect the other”¹⁷⁹.

The position and actions of the Sacred Band at Leuctra have been the source of long held contentions. It also underscores the function of both reserves and elite troops in Greek warfare. Epaminondas and Pelopidas unleashed both on the unsuspecting Spartans. At Delium, the Sacred Band or a group of three hundred picked troops similar to it called the “charioteers and footmen”, served in the front ranks like the “cutting edge”¹⁸⁰ of the twenty-five man deep Theban phalanx. Anderson writes that most recent scholarship (his book was written in 1970) believes the Sacred Band was used this way at Leuctra and was therefore positioned on the front of the deep column. Cornelius Nepos, a Roman biographer living in the first century BC, takes a different view in his biography of Pelopidas. The Roman writes, “In the battle of Leuctra, where Epaminondas commanded, Pelopidas was the leader of the picked body that first overthrew the phalanx of the Spartans”¹⁸¹. This would imply that

178 Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 18.1

179 Ibid, 19.3

180 Anderson, p 216

181 Nepos, *Lives of Eminent Commanders*, 16.4.2

Pelopidas did not command an independent unit and that it was distributed among the Theban soldiery. Such a use of quality elite infantry would be a waste of their talents. It also seems to fly in the face of the principle of bringing concentrated force down on one part of the Spartan phalanx Epaminondas was attempting to achieve and would certainly not aid in the winning of local superiority. Plutarch agrees, recording that the Sacred Band was kept as one unit for what seemed the most obvious of reasons:

When Gorgidas founded the Sacred Band, he originally distributed its members among the front ranks of the entire Theban phalanx. The result was that their exceptional courage was made inconspicuous, and their striking power was not exploited in any way which could benefit the whole army, because it was dissipated and diluted with that of a large body of inferior troops. But after the Band had distinguished themselves at Tegyra where they fought as an individual formation around Pelopidas' own person, he saw to it that they were never afterwards separated from one another or broken up; instead he treated them as a single unit and gave them the place of danger in his greatest battles¹⁸².

To understand how the Sacred Band would contribute to maximum effect at Leuctra, it is necessary to look at the much smaller battle of Tegrya four years earlier. This battalion sized meeting engagement in western Boeotia near Orchomenus is referred to by Plutarch as “the prelude to Leuctra”¹⁸³. The battle of Tegrya also shows how the Thebans incorporated the lessons of Nemea and Coronea into an actual operational scheme that appeared four years later at Leuctra.

In 375 BC, Pelopidas led three hundred Thebans (never explicitly identified as the Sacred Band) from a large scale raid and ran head on into a larger detachment of 1,000-1,200 Spartans. He reacted quickly and ordered his cavalry to charge the Spartans while his infantry ran in close behind them. Plutarch records that Pelopidas drew his infantry into close formation, eliminating any gaps between shields (much like the formation in the “second battle” at Coronea.), and aimed them for “wherever the cavalry charged, this point would offer him the best chance to break through the enemy

¹⁸² Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 19.5

¹⁸³ *Ibid*, 16.1

who outnumbered him”¹⁸⁴. Although it would not seem possible to use the cavalry in this manner, it cannot be denied that Pelopidas is attempting to bring his entire command down on one point to break through the Spartan line in the same way his countrymen did at Coronea. Plutarch also writes “There was a furious clash as the two lines met, the fighting being fiercest where the two [Spartan] commanders were stationed, and it was there the Spartan polemarchs engaged Pelopidas and were cut down”¹⁸⁵. This passage reveals that the Thebans, perhaps intentionally, aimed for the Spartan commanders to decapitate the enemy. Plutarch's account continues with the Spartans attempting to open ranks to let the Thebans escape but that Pelopidas used the “channels” to attack deeper into the Lacedaemonian formation until they panicked and fled. Plutarch is correct in calling the battle a preview of Leuctra. One can see many origins of the strategy at Leuctra. The concentration of force on one point, seizing the offensive while outnumbered, and attacking the “head of the serpent” are unmistakable devices that make an appearance in the more famous battle four years later.

Tegyra was also important for two other reasons. The Sacred Band, deployed as hoplites, not only showed itself to be a formidable unit, it defeated a larger Spartan force. This gave the elite unit a morale advantage that cannot be quantified and gave confidence to the regular infantry who would follow them at Leuctra.

Anderson does not take the position of Cornelius Nepos that the Sacred Band was distributed among the army at Leuctra. Pelopidas' speed and dash would not have singled out by Plutarch if he were only an officer in a phalanx commanded by Epaminondas. Anderson reasons that Pelopidas was using his own judgment and Epaminondas trusted him to command the Sacred Band virtually as his own. He believes that the Sacred Band did operate as an intact unit but he does not take the modern

184 Ibid 17.5

185 Ibid 17.7

position that the Sacred Band was placed at the front of the deep phalanx. Towards this end, Anderson revives the old nineteenth century Kochly-Rustow theory that the Sacred Band was its own independent unit and behind the deep Theban phalanx (Figure Five). Anderson reasons that if the Sacred Band formed an independent unit and if Pelopidas used his own initiative at Leuctra, the Kochly-Rustow theory is the most accurate explanation of what really happened at Leuctra since Xenophon does not provide many details.

This theory is based on the location of Kleombrotos in the battle. Anderson cites Xenophon's *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians* as a Spartan field manual that places Kleombrotos between the first and second *morai*:

Then the king puts himself at the head of the troops, and if no enemy appears he heads the line of march, no one preceding him except the Sciritae, and the mounted troopers exploring in front. If, however, there is any reason to anticipate a battle, the king takes the leading column of the first army corps and wheels to the right until he has got into position with two army corps and two generals of division on either flank. The disposition of the supports is assigned to the eldest of the royal council (or staff corps) acting as brigadier — the staff consisting of all peers who share the royal mess and quarters, with the soothsayers, surgeons, and pipers, whose place is in the front of the troops, with, finally, any volunteers who happen to be present. So that there is no check or hesitation in anything to be done; every contingency is provided for¹⁸⁶

Anderson concludes that as the Spartans attempted to outflank the Theban deep column to the right, Epaminondas sent this huge phalanx straight for the person of Kleombrotos. The chaos engulfing the Spartan hoplite ranks when the cavalry was thrown back into them did not help matters for the Lacedaemonians. Anderson cites Xenophon's description of the fierce fighting around the Spartan king to again mark his location. Meanwhile, the Sacred Band, according to Anderson, emerged from behind and to the right of the main Theban formation, led by Pelopidas himself, to catch the Spartan flanking movement itself in the flank and to save Epaminondas' men from suffering heavy casualties. Minutes

186 Xenophon, *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, 13.6

later, Kleombrotos was struck down at the height of the fighting.

Anderson explains the successful Theban attempt at decapitating the Spartan army but his view of the Sacred Band's role is not sustainable. While it is possible the Sacred Band did move in the way Anderson believes, it would have been rather difficult to coordinate. If Pelopidas was behind the main Theban phalanx, how could he see what was happening from behind such a dense, fifty man deep formation? If he could not discern what was happening, how was news relayed to him in such a timely manner that he could catch the Spartan flanking move in its own flank? Finally, one wonders, even if all did go to plan and Pelopidas was able to determine when to move his men, how could he physically move his armored men fast enough to maintain their ranks and files and cohesion fast enough to counter the Spartans?

It is possible that the Thebans may have had a spotter (perhaps Pelopidas himself) to signal when the Sacred Band was to move. A good argument in support of the Anderson and Kochly-Rustow thesis is the following: Pelopidas may have had orders to move from behind the main phalanx at a predetermined time, probably the minute Epaminondas ordered the colossal fifty shield deep phalanx to move forward. Such a sequence of events would get the Sacred Band into position not only to block the Spartan flanking move but perhaps drive it back and turn the corner on the Lacedaemonians.

There is a consensus of scholars who have a simpler, and just as effective, model for the Battle of Leuctra. It illustrates the “modern” position of the Sacred Band's location and role. Ferrill, Hamilton, and Buckler agree that the Sacred Band's actions could have only occurred if it was stationed in front of the Theban army. It would not be possible for the Theban elite troops to move from the rear fast enough to attack Kleombrotos and take advantage of the confusion wrought by the Lacedaemonian cavalry crashing backwards into their fellow Spartans. This forward position also highlights the role

of elite troops (the Sacred Band) and reserves (the rest of the deep column) in opening gaps and/or exploiting them.

Though a consensus exists, there are subtle differences in these views. Ferrill places the Sacred Band, as one unit, at the head of the Theban column. He sees the Theban victory as a clear combined arms effort. He gives the successful Theban cavalry attack its share of glory but he attaches most of the credit for the Theban victory to the massed infantry charge. This charge, led by the Sacred Band, in an oblique run on the double against the extending Spartan right, in effect, caught Kleombrotos in mid move¹⁸⁷. This view describes the Sacred Band as the wedge of an ax to cut and opening and the rest of the Theban deep column as a reserve to force its way through the opening and shatter the Spartan phalanx. Hamilton agrees with Ferrill on the position, role, and oblique movement of the Sacred Band at Leuctra but he argues that the fatal gap in the Spartan line was not caused by the elite unit. His contention is that when Kleombrotos realized he faced Thebans in a deep column instead of second rate soldiers, he attempted to wheel part of his line around to encircle the enemy on his left in a Mantinea-style flanking attack. Pelopidas saw an opportunity and dashed forward through the gap with the Sacred Band on the run, followed by the rest of the column¹⁸⁸. With comparatively little opposition, the Thebans would have cut the Spartans off from their allies and swarmed over them. John Buckler's *The Theban Hegemony, 371 BC-362 BC*, is another book published after Anderson's. He shares Ferrill and Hamilton's view on the Sacred Band's role and actions but he envisions Pelopidas' command as more independent and dynamic. In his interpretation of the sources, Buckler writes that as Epaminondas's phalanx bore down on the struggling Spartans, Pelopidas ordered the Sacred Band to detach itself from the main Theban body and attack Kleombrotos's royal guard.¹⁸⁹ This would have

187 Ferrill, p 195

188 Hamilton, p 210

189 Buckler, p 64

pinned the Royal Guard, and Kleombrotos, in place and overrun them with a deep phalanx at least four times their size.

The bulk of the recent scholarship supports the position of the Sacred Band leading the attack with the rest of the deep column acting as a reserve. Ferrill's version seems most accurate, considering the Theban emphasis on “cutting the head off of the serpent” and isolating the Spartan contingent so it could be hammered by full Theban column concentrating its power on one point—Kleombrotos' Royal Guard. This argument seems to find support from Plutarch's narrative of Leuctra. At the height of the Spartan confusion, he writes:

But at this point Pelopidas dashed forward from his position, and advancing with his band of three hundred at the run, attacked the Spartans before Cleombrotos could either deploy his wing or bring it back into position and close up ranks.¹⁹⁰

Stefan Chrissanthos has an interesting suggestion that might answer lingering question about the Sacred Band's location at Leuctra and the role of reserves and elite troops in Greek battles¹⁹¹. He posits that the Sacred Band was stationed to the right of the deep phalanx, linking it with the “refused flank” of Boeotian allies (Figure Six). From this area, the Sacred Band would be in perfect position to attack the gap opening between the first and second *morai* if Kleombrotos attempted a Mantinea-style flank or even charge in behind the defeated and panicked Spartan cavalry. The effect would be to drive a wedge into the Spartans for the deep column to exploit. It would be easier for the Sacred Band to attack at an even sharper oblique angle. Chrissanthos' placement of the Sacred Band illustrates on a conceptual level what elite shock troops can do and how reserves can exploit gaps and break a phalanx even as solid as a Spartan one. Concerns about a gap between the Thebans and their allies is inconsequential since they are not part of the battle.

190 Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 23.5

191 Stefan Chrissanthos, *Warfare of the Ancient World*, (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishing, 2008), p 69

Chrissanthos' proposal, however, does not explain, how it would be possible for the Theban deep column to carry out this flanking maneuver. It was not a versatile formation and it would be difficult for a deep formation to perform even with practice. The muscle-bound tendency of the deep phalanx was shown to all at both Nemea and Coronea. Nor is there any mention in the primary sources about the Theban deep column attempting such a maneuver. He also neglects to address any Spartan attempts at flanking which had, by 371 BC, become part of their standard doctrine. A.M. Devine argues in favor of an even more unique opinion suggesting that:

“...the Theban formation was not rectangular, but a [Lambda]-shaped wedge. The Sacred Band, arrayed in rows of 3, 5, 7...33 at 16 shields' depth formed the solid apex of the [lambda] with two legs of 16 across and 34 deep completing it. Thus the Sacred Band at 288 men and two legs of 544 men each would have made a [lambda] of 1376. The other Boiotians would have been arrayed in a rectangle 16 shields deep to the right.¹⁹²

Such conjecture about a wedge seems to apply to the battle at Mantinea in 362 BC where Xenophon describes a Theban formation that jugged out like the bow of a trireme. Such a wedge formation would dramatically reduce the danger of the Thebans being outflanked and it might explain Diodoros' contention that the Spartans advanced at Leuctra in a moon-shaped formation¹⁹³ if the Spartan line had bent around the oncoming wedge. This theory is credible when one takes into account the Theban doctrine of concentrating force against one point. The Sacred Band's actions at battle of Tegyra would argue in favor of Devine's view. Unfortunately, Xenophon supplies the only contemporary account of the battle and his narrative seems to imply that the entire Theban part of the army was fifty ranks deep.

The modern position, best illustrated by Ferrill's diagram (Figure Seven), seems most simple to execute under the circumstances of battle. The circumstances of Leuctra included an allied flank that

192 A. M. Devine, “EMBO/\ON: A Study in Tactical Terminology.” *Phoenix* 37 (1983), pp 207-237

193 Diodorus, 15.55.3

could possibly collapse at any moment even without contact from the enemy. Celerity was vital to Epaminondas' plan. He had to win the battle before his allies could lose it. Ferrill's diagram and the "modern" position have the advantage of an economy of motion the more quixotic Sacred Band arguments lack. Thebes applied these lessons learned in blood and pain and were able to end annual Spartan invasions that nearly lead to famine in the Boeotian War and avenge earlier defeats at Nemea and Coronea.

The Spartan defeat at Leuctra and the beginning of her decline is credited, correctly, to the generalship and insight of Epaminondas but the Spartans deserve some of the blame for their defeat as well. In their constant fighting with the Thebans, they violated the Lycurgan precept not to fight a war too long with the same enemy because it only made them better soldiers. Plutarch records a story in *Life of Pelopidas* that shows at least one Spartan was aware of what kind of enemy Sparta was inadvertently creating:

The Thebans, meantime, singly, having many skirmishes with the Spartans in Boeotia, and fighting some battles, not great indeed, but important as training and instructing them, thus had their minds raised, and their bodies inured to labour, and gained both experience and courage by these frequent encounters, insomuch that we have it related that Antalcidas, the Spartan, said to Agesilaus, returning wounded from Boeotia, "Indeed, the Thebans have paid you handsomely for instructing them in the art of war, against their wills."¹⁹⁴

The Spartan Hegemony ended at Leuctra and with it, the Spartan Mirage dissipated. As a result of the defeat at Leuctra, fewer than a thousand Spartiates remained to keep order in the Spartan-dominated Peloponnese as well as northern and central Greece. It comes as no surprise that revolts began breaking out immediately across the Peloponnese as Sparta desperately attempted to shift too few men to too many trouble spots. The situation would get much worse.

Leuctra ushered in an even more sophisticated and complex phase of Greek warfare.

¹⁹⁴ Plutarch, *Pelopidas*, 15.4

Epaminondas would help carry the evolution of Greek warfare to another level. His invasions of Laconia, beginning in 370 BC-369 BC and culminating at Mantinea eight years later, was not only an attempt to “crush the head of the serpent” on a greater scale, it was the elevation of Greek warfare from a merely tactical to an overall strategic dimension.

Conclusion

The evolution of Greek battlefield tactics in the fourth century BC was the result of the challenge to Sparta's hegemony. Sparta's hegemony over Greece was anchored by the heavy infantry phalanx and her expertise in that form of warfare. The Spartan phalanx was not the preeminent combat formation in Greece simply because of sheer brutal strength of its *othismos*. Sparta's phalanx had evolved into a maneuverable and versatile instrument well tailored to answer challenges to her leadership, or what others saw as dictatorship. Thebes, Athens, and the other city-states saw that the way to overthrow the Hegemon of Hellas was to defeat Sparta's infantry on the battlefield and to do that entailed finding a way to overcome the Spartan phalanx.

There were other factors that influenced the evolution of Greek battlefield tactics in the fourth century BC but the ultimate catalyst proved to be futility itself. Direct confrontation in the old ritualistic manner usually resulted in abject defeat. Fighting the Spartans on their own terms was a clear recipe for continued defeat.

What was required was some form of “out of the box” thinking. Such thought tended to run contrary to the conservative agrarian hoplite mentality but the alternative would be continued Spartan domination. Another obstacle was the Spartan Mirage, which cast such a huge psychological shadow over many hoplite armies, sapping confidence and contributing to defeat before they even stepped foot on the battlefield. The effect of the Spartan Mirage is best illustrated at Nemea when the Thebans, even in a deep phalanx, found several omens that declared the best place for them would be on flank furthest from the Spartans.

The answer to the question of defeating the Spartan phalanx lie in a combination of both old

and new tactics. There was also an element of having to emulate the enemy to some degree in order to defeat the enemy. The truth that could not be avoided was to defeat Sparta's infantry, they would have to be confronted and beaten on the battlefield.

The Theban actions at Nemea exemplified the quandary facing Thebes and her allies. The Thebans were willing to employ a risky tactic (the deep column) over the objections of their more conventionally minded allies but they were apparently fearful of attacking the Spartans head on with it. Conversely, the Spartans had mastered a flanking movement that allowed them to fight numerically larger enemies with a confidence further bolstered by professionalism and constant practice of such maneuvers. The amateur militias of the Thebans and their allies could not match the quality of Spartan infantry.

The reluctance to face Sparta's infantry was noticeable at Coronea as well but when circumstances forced the Thebans to fight directly against Spartan hoplites, the descendants of Cadmus managed to fight through Agesilaus' men and emerge intact. While Coronea was clearly a Spartan victory, the Thebans had fought well and, as Plutarch noted, had not been routed. Not only had the Thebans learned from Nemea a few months earlier, the Theban army at Coronea constituted a *de facto* professional army, complete with veteran leadership and an institutional memory.

It may not have been apparent at the time but at Coronea, the building blocks for the eventual Theban triumph were in place. Professionalism, confidence, and above all, the tactic of concentration of force on a particular point, would all be pulled together by effective leadership. Epaminondas and Pelopidas would provide that leadership at Leuctra, adding other innovations that were carried out by citizen hoplites led by a professional core that was the Sacred Band. Adding to Sparta's future woes was the constant fighting with Thebes, which, as Antalcidas reminded Agesilaus, only made the

Thebans better soldiers.

Iphikrates and Chabrias pioneered radical departures from established military practices with their peltasts, proving that the light infantry, and even cavalry, could do great damage to Sparta's hoplites. However, Lechaeum also proved that only infantry could take and hold ground as Kallias' hoplites advance compelled the Spartans to abandon their position. Epaminondas and his confederate Pelopidas applied what was essentially a throwback solution to the puzzle of defeating Sparta's phalanx.

The concentration of force on a particular point instead of a collision along the entire length of the line and with the strategy of “crushing the head of the serpent” by isolating the Spartans were new battlefield concepts but they were carried out by the old reliable hoplites. Most of those hoplites were citizen militiamen but they were led and inspired by the Sacred Band who took the hardest tasks for themselves. Leading the attack from the left flank and oblique advances were not endeavors for mere “weekend warriors” who had little time to train for anything but to fight in mass.

It must be recognized in this period that there were no notable advances in military technology. The defeat of the Spartan phalanx was brought about by new formations, professionalism, and a new willingness to take risks that convention decried as reckless. Sparta's enemies used these advances to maximum advantage on the immediate battlefield. They also used their strengths against Sparta's weaknesses.

Imperial overstretch exacerbated Sparta's demographic problems and her imperious attitude towards supposed allies left the Spartans standing alone before the Theban juggernaut. The overstretch was both external, with many commitments outside Laconia, and internal, with a potential helot revolt constantly simmering under the surface. The decline in the number of Spartiates, due to the *agoge*

training, long deployments far from home, and steady consolidation of *kleroi* in fewer hands, eroded the ability of Sparta to project power. On the battlefield it led to an increased reliance on Peloponnesian allies to absorb the attack of the enemies best troops, the presence of more *neodamodeis* and perhaps an aversion to full scale frontal assaults that would lead the death of priceless Spartiates, hence the inclusion of the flanking attack as part of Spartan doctrine. Such a situation would also lead to a Spartan unwillingness to experiment with new formations, resulting in a static stance against a dynamic enemy actively experimenting with new combat methods. The Spartans had placed themselves in a position where they could only react to new initiatives, which resulted in a situation where one defeat could bring the entire hegemony crashing down. It came to a head at Leuctra and it was no accident that none of the Peloponnesian allies came to Kleombrotos' rescue when his Spartans were cut off, isolated, and hammered to pieces by the Theban fifty shield deep phalanx. In the end, the Spartan phalanx, despite its early changes, and the hegemony it supported, was defeated by another phalanx operating with its own adaptations and in conjunction with other elements such as peltasts and cavalry. The catastrophic defeat at Leuctra spelled the end of the Spartan Hegemony and paved the way for Thebes' brief role of hegemon of Hellas.

Although the deep phalanx was the centerpiece of every Theban confrontation against Sparta, the ultimate victory of Thebes cannot be attributed to this tactic alone. The Theban victory was due to the integration of other tactics into a combined arms approach. The concentration of striking power at one point was combined with the professional and intensified training of picked troops (the Sacred Band) and welded together as a virtual battering ram. The potential of peltasts and their powers of attrition was seen at Lechaem. Horsemen were needed to secure the flanks and screen movements and although Greek cavalry was not regarded as a shock weapon, the Theban horse showed at Leuctra

that it might have some sort of future use in that role. The net effect was to weaken the Spartan phalanx so that it could be defeated by the Theban phalanx.

The Thebans also altered the phalanx, deepening the ranks and placing its striking power on the opposite side to counter the Spartan elite. Another important advance was the concentration of the phalanx's striking power at one point. This was brought about by two developments. One was the creation of a force of elite troops, or in the parlance of the period, "picked troops." Inculcating a professional ethos that was the opposite of the citizen militia, the Sacred Band was created for the most dangerous tasks. This is due to a second, intangible development—confidence.

At Nemea, and even Coronea, the Thebans at first avoided Spartan contingents and attempted to win the battle by crushing the inferior Peloponnesian allies. At Coronea, the Thebans were forced to fight the Spartans in the most direct manner possible and with their escape from annihilation, the Spartan Mirage began to evaporate. The Battle of Tegyra reinforced this lesson in a new generation of Thebans. By Leuctra, the Theban battleplan was predicated on seeking out and confronting the Spartan elite.

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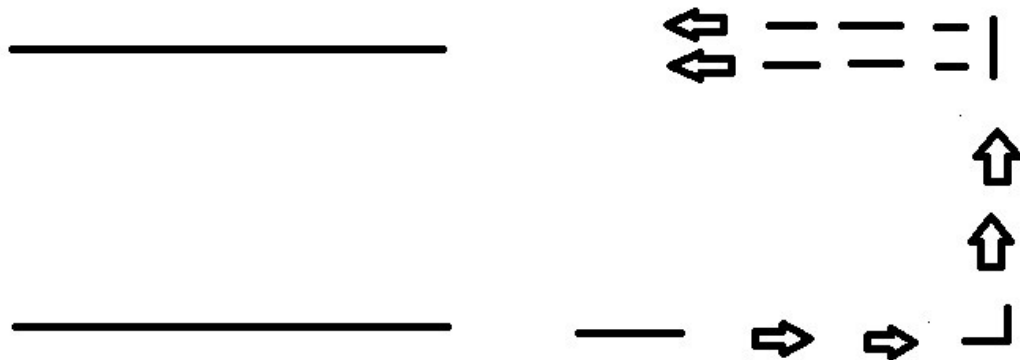
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Appendix

Figure One: Jones' Spartan Flanking Maneuver Schematic:

Enemy Phalanx



Spartan Phalanx

Figure Two: Position of *Protostatai* and *Ouragos* during flanking turn

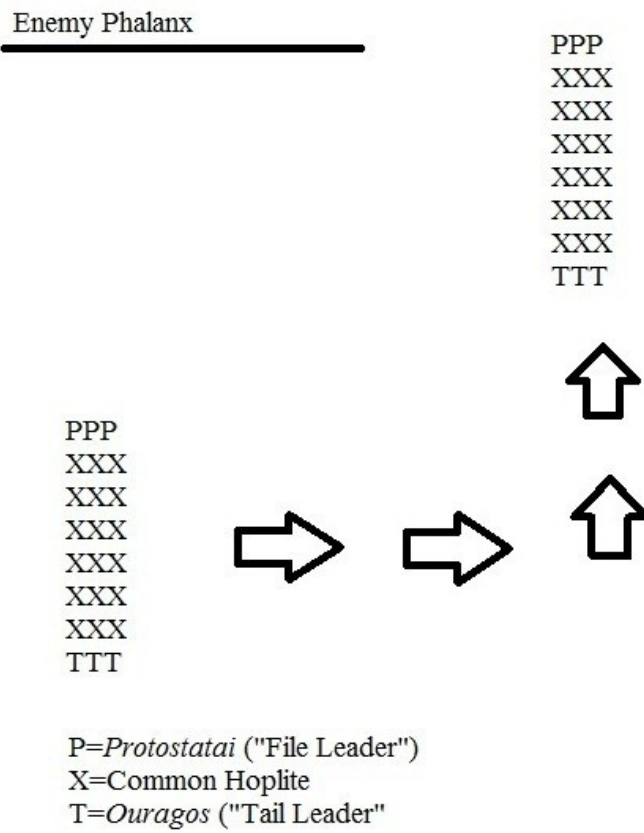
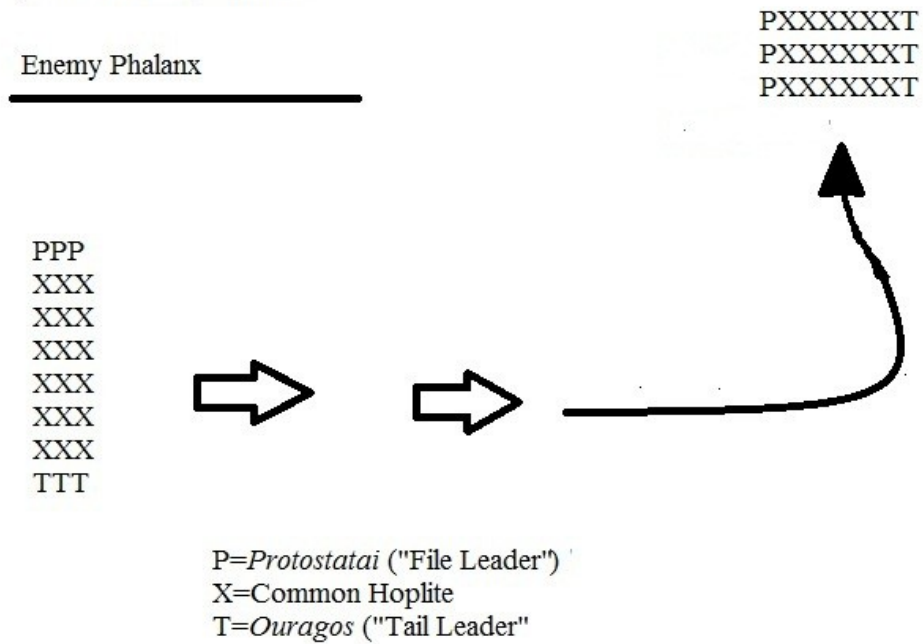


Figure Three: "Gateturn"



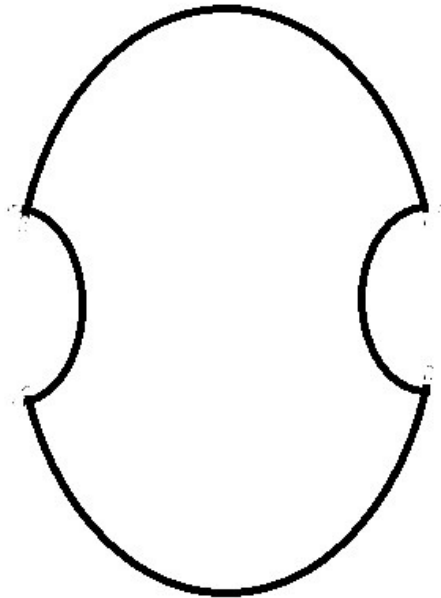


Figure Four: Representation of Shape of Boeotian Shield

Figure Five: Kochly-Rustow Theory on Sacred Band at Leuctra

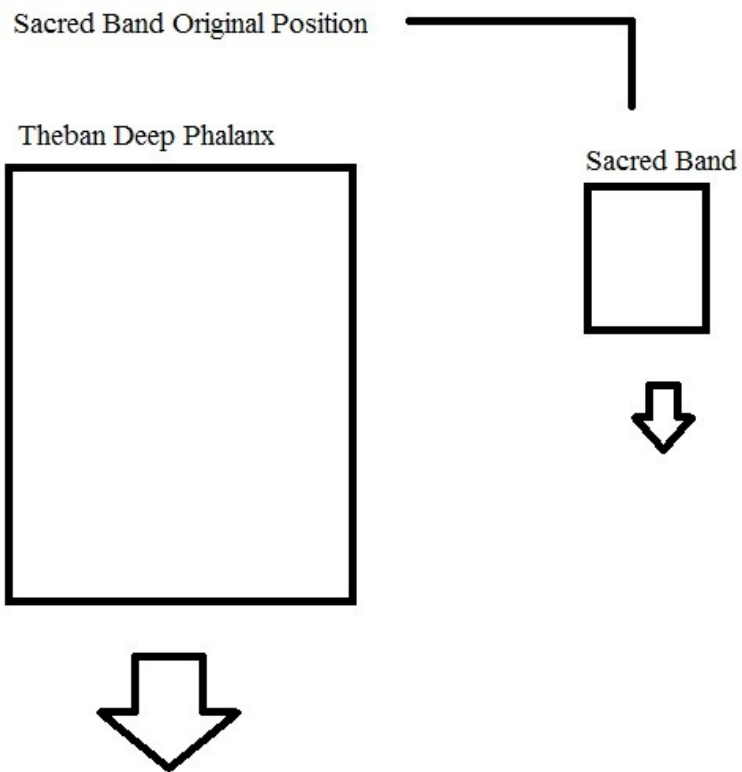


Figure Six: Chrissanthos' theory on the position of the Sacred Band at Leuctra

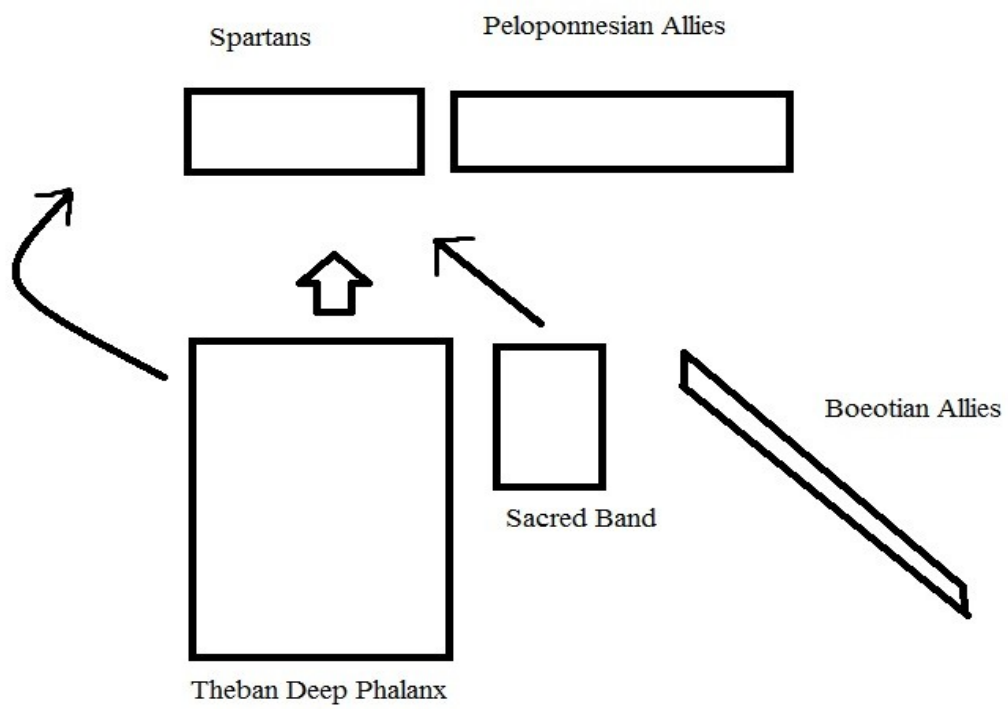


Figure Seven: Ferrill/Modern Position (Leuctra)

